The oppression of women in *THE AWAKENING* and “THE YELLOW WALLPAPER”

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1. INTRODUCTION

> All history attests that man has subjected woman to his will, used her as a means to promote his selfish gratification, to minister to his sensual pleasures, to be instrumental in promoting his comfort; but never has he desired to elevate her to that rank she was created to fill. He has done all he could to debase and enslave her mind; […].
>
> I ask no favors for my sex, I surrender not our claim to equality. All I ask of our brethren is that they will take their feet off from our necks, and permit us to stand upright on the ground which God has designed us to occupy.

Already in 1837 in a series of *Letters on the Equality of the Sexes*, Sarah Grimké (1988: 35f.), one of the pioneering figures in the nineteenth-century abolitionist and women's rights movement, voiced her discontent about woman's situation in a male dominated society and criticized what Kate Chopin and Charlotte Perkins Gilman later rendered problematic in *The Awakening* (1899) and "The Yellow Wallpaper" (1892): Society's refusal to accept women as equals and to "let [them] wander beyond the cultural 'room' of marriage and motherhood" (Horner/ Zlosnik 1990: 33).

Chopin's Edna Pontellier as well as Gilman's female narrator-protagonist both belong to a society that is characterized by female subservience and self-effacement. As part of the upper- and upper-middle-class, the women are well provided for, but their desires are silenced: Both live in a 'gilded cage'. While the heroine of *The Awakening* is trapped in her limiting role as wife and mother, unable to satisfy her desire for passion and autonomy, "The Yellow Wallpaper's" female protagonist is physically locked up in the attic of an old mansion where a rest cure, prescribed by her husband, forces her to physical and mental inactivity.

The aim of this paper is to examine the harmful results of male oppression on the female life and psyche in Kate Chopin's *The Awakening* and Charlotte Perkins Gilman's "The Yellow Wallpaper". The first section of this paper deals with the socio-historical context of the two texts: After giving a brief overview of Kate Chopin's and Charlotte Perkins Gilman's lives and writing careers, I provide a survey of recent research done on *The Awakening* and "The Yellow Wallpaper".

I then discuss the phenomenon of American Victorianism, its key events, norms, and values, with particular focus on the situation of women in this period.

The second section of this paper comprises the analysis of the two texts: I first examine the various female concepts presented in *The Awakening* and "The Yellow Wallpaper". Secondly, I point out the social, but also physical barriers that establish the protagonists' positions as captives of their environment, and explain how these forms of captivity are depicted in Chopin's novel and Gilman's short story. Thirdly, I discuss whether the fate of both women – death and madness – can be interpreted as punishment for their non-conformity or as personal triumph over the oppressive patriarchal structures in late 19th-century Victorian society.

Two widely studied texts, I am well aware that a discussion of the whole range of themes elaborated in *The Awakening* and "The Yellow Wallpaper" would go beyond the scope of this thesis. Furthermore, I would like to point out that due to the texts' popularity an enormous amount of research has already been done on the patriarchal theme of both texts. Therefore, the prospects for the discovery of new aspects regarding this topic seem limited. My choice to focus on the patriarchal theme of Chopin's and Gilman's writing, however, was motivated by two factors: First, by my admiration for Kate Chopin and Charlotte Perkins Gilman whose brave writings served as an inspiration for the 1960s women's movement; and second, by the continuing topicality of the theme as millions of women worldwide are still forced to face male oppression on a daily basis in either social, political or sexual concerns.

2. BIOGRAPHY

2.1 Kate Chopin

Katherine O'Flaherty was born in St Louis, Missouri on 8 February 1850. Her father, Thomas O'Flaherty, was an Irish immigrant who as a successful merchant had accumulated some wealth, her mother, Eliza Faris, was a woman of French Creole descent. At the age of five Katherine was sent to Sacred Heart Academy, a boarding school for girls, where she received a strict Catholic education. Shortly after her enrolment her father died in a tragic railway accident. Growing up in an all-female environment – Kate was raised by her mother and grandmother and educated by nuns – she soon learned that an autonomous life was possible for women.

After her graduation in 1868 Kate made her debut in society, and only two years later she married the Creole cotton trader Oscar Chopin. They moved to New Orleans where three of the couples' six children were born. Although fully immersed in her role as a "dutiful wife" and "conscientious mother" (Gilbert/ Gubar 1985/1996: 1011), Kate Chopin found enough time for "observing" New Orleans' society, "listening and gathering stories" (Toth 2008: 17). Some of Chopin's future protagonists were based on friends and acquaintances she had made during this period.

When Oscar's cotton business failed, the family moved to Cloutierville, a rural area of Louisiana, where they lived on a plantation. For Kate who had enjoyed the vibrant urban lifestyle with all its amenities and who was used to an unusual amount of freedom, settling in an isolated place like that was hard. While her husband was well-liked and fully integrated in the community of Cloutierville, Kate Chopin was perceived as a stranger with "flamboyant fashions and brusque urban manners" (Toth 2008: 14). After the death of Oscar Chopin in 1882 of swamp fever and a scandalous two-year affair with a wealthy, but married local planter, Kate Chopin moved back to St Louis to live with her mother. After her mother's unexpected death in 1885 she created the city's first salon, which due to her vibrant and witty conversations attracted the most prominent professors, writers and artists of St. Louis.

Since her early youth Kate had kept a journal, composed poems and written sketches, but the unexpected death of her husband seemed to have initiated Chopin's serious literary activity. She started to study the works of Victorian thinkers, such as Charles Darwin and Thomas Henry Huxley, drew her inspiration from American women regionalists like Sarah Orne Jewett and read the texts of French naturalists like Zola, Flaubert and Maupassant. Especially Guy de Maupassant, who became one of her literary idols, strongly influenced her writing. His "[escape] from tradition and authority" (Gilbert/ Gubar 1985/1996: 1012) was frequently reflected in her short fictions. Numerous of her stories question the "inequities of traditional marriage, […] arbitrary race distinctions" as well as "class divisions" (ibid.).

In 1889 Kate Chopin published her first literary work, the poem *If It Might Be*. The short story *A Point at Issue!* and her first novel *At Fault* followed shortly afterwards. By 1890 Kate Chopin had become the first woman professional writer in St Louis. She published two collections of short stories, *Bayou Folk* (1894) and *A Night in Acadie* (1897), both dealing with Southern culture and Creole traditions, earning her the reputation of a local color writer. In 1899 her masterpiece, the novel *The Awakening*, came out. Chopin's third collection of stories *A Vocation and a Voice* (1900) was not published due to the hostile reviews *The Awakening* had received. Threatened by Chopin's "frank exploration of a late-nineteenth-century woman's growth toward sexual and emotional independence", the mainly male critics termed the novel unhealthy and complained that "the purport of the story [could] hardly be described in language fit for publication" (Gilbert/ Gubar 1985/1996: 1011).

At that time the author's health was already deteriorating. Her declining condition as well as the undeserved literary disappointment following *The Awakening* resulted in a few uninspired stories and poems. In 1904, in her early fifties, Kate Chopin died of a cerebral hemorrhage.

After her death, Kate Chopin fell into oblivion for almost half a century until *The Awakening* was rediscovered during the second wave of the women's movement in the early 1960s. Today the novel is an integral part of the American

literary canon and after the discovery of an unpublished 1894 erotic story *The Storm*, Kate Chopin is widely perceived as a "pioneering writer about sex" (Toth 2008: 15). It seems that "like Edna in *The Awakening*, Chopin [has lived] with an 'outward existence which conforms', but with an 'inward life which questions'" (ibid.).

2.2 Charlotte Perkins Gilman

Charlotte Anna Perkins was born in Hartford, Connecticut in 1860 to Mary Westcott Perkins and Frederick Beecher Perkins, a nephew of Harriet Beecher Stowe. Soon after Charlotte's birth her father left the family and Charlotte and her brother were raised by their mother. They had a rather unhappy childhood: Mary Perkins would refuse their children "any physical signs of tenderness" or "emotional fulfillment" (Gilbert/ Gubar 1985/1996: 1130) and maintaining contact with their father who visited only occasionally was difficult. Moreover, the family had to move nineteen times in eighteen years due to Mary Perkins' poverty.

Later in her autobiography Charlotte Perkins Gilman explained her unusual and complicated relationship with her father. She stated that Frederick Beecher Perkins "seem[ed] more the librarian than the father" (Gilbert/ Gubar 1985/1996: 1130) who taught her a lot about books, but remained emotionally distant. Nonetheless, she felt gratitude to him as Charlotte was certain that her own intellectual ambition had its roots in her "Beecher heritage" (Golden 2004: 9).

Having received only limited formal education, between 1878 and 1879 Charlotte attended the Rhode Island School of Design where she received the knowledge and skills essential for working as an art teacher and governess. In 1882 Gilman met her future husband Charles Walter Stetson, a Providence artist. Rejecting his proposal after an acquaintanceship of only seventeen days, Charlotte finally agrees to marry him in 1884 although she had doubts that "combining marriage, motherhood, and work" (Gilbert/ Gubar 1985/1996: 1130) was possible. One year later the couple's only daughter, Katharine Beecher Stetson Chamberlin, was born.

Having suffered from bouts of depression since 1882, Gilman experienced what might today be diagnosed as a postpartum depression after Katharine's birth. During a solo trip to Pasadena with her close friend Grace Ellery Channing, Charlotte's health improved, but the return to Providence and her husband again worsened her depression and Gilman sought help from Dr. S. Weir Mitchell, a famous physician and leading specialist of the so-called 'rest cure'. She was "put [.] to bed, where she was fed, bathed, massaged, and advised to have her child with her at all times" (Gilbert/ Gubar 1985/1996: 1130). The forced inactivity caused her health to deteriorate further and Gilman had a serious nervous breakdown. Having to choose "between going insane, and staying sane" (ibid.) Charlotte Perkins Gilman again took up her writing, returned to physical exercise and left Charles Walter Stetson in 1888. The divorce proceedings as well as Gilman's wish to send her daughter to her former husband and his new wife were a big scandal in the newspapers, which termed the author "unfeeling and unnatural" (Gilbert/ Gubar 1985/1996: 1131).

In 1892 Gilman's now classic short story "The Yellow Wallpaper", addressing the topic of postpartum depression she was all too familiar with, was published, her main goal being, as she later stated, "to educate her doctor, S. Weir Mitchell, about his mistaken treatment for nervous depression" (Golden 2004: 45). In order to support herself after the separation from her husband, Charlotte Perkins Gilman run a boarding house, started editing, teaching and lecturing. Having been involved in Nationalist politics since 1890, Gilman became active in various reform movements and a great supporter of women's issues, rejecting the "stereotypical notions of women as fragile, passive, sickly, dependent beings" (Golden 2004: 9).

In her work *Women and Economics* (1898), the "Bible of the women's movement", Gilman expressed the radical opinion that "women's economic dependency on men had arrested not only their intellectual and emotional growth but also the healthy development of the human species" (Gilbert/ Gubar 1985/1996: 1131). Developing her ideas further she later argued that "the subordination of the female sex had been necessary in the past for human

evolution, but that in the twentieth century masculine assertiveness had to be complemented by a female culture grounded in cooperation and nurturance" (ibid.). Other publications in which she continued to attack a patriarchal society that oppressed women followed: In *Concerning Children* (1900), *The Home: Its Work and Influence* (1903), *Human Work* (1904) and *Women and Social Service* (1907) Gilman "advocated equal education, suffrage, payment for house service, careers for women, and dress reform" (Golden 2004: 9).

Although the author had always had a critical attitude towards marriage, in 1900 she got married to George Houghton Gilman, a younger cousin of hers she was reintroduced to in 1897. In 1909 Charlotte Perkins Gilman founded the *Forerunner*, a thirty-two-page monthly periodical that addressed women's rights issues. The single-handedly written *Forerunner* attracted readers worldwide and was Gilman's way "to express important truths, needed yet unpopular" (Golden 2004: 45). A number of her books, such as *The Man-Made World* (1911), *Herland* (1915) as well as *His Religion and Hers* (1923) were published in this periodical.

The decline of the feminist movement in the 1920s caused Gilman's career to slow down. Diagnosed with inoperable breast cancer, she focused on finishing her autobiography (*The Living of Charlotte Perkins Gilman*, 1935) before she committed suicide in 1935 by inhaling chloroform.

Gilman's literary accomplishments include poems, short stories, novels, theoretical works and an autobiography. "The Yellow Wallpaper", however, which according to her was "no more literature than [her] other stuff" (Golden 2004: 1) established her reputation as an outstanding writer.

3. RECENT RESEARCH

3.1 The Awakening

> Because it was so far ahead of the times, *The Awakening* has had a turbulent history. It was rejected when it appeared in 1899, forgotten for thirty years, rejected again in the 1930s and forgotten for another generation, rediscovered in the 1950s and 1960s by scholars in Europe and the USA, embraced in the 1970s by feminists in the USA and the UK – and then accepted ecstatically by teachers, students and readers of all kinds. Today it is reprinted in dozens of editions and textbooks, as well as in several translations, and is one of America's most widely read, most widely loved classic books (Koloski 2008: 161).

Koloski's quotation perfectly reflects the controversial potential of Chopin's masterpiece. Already in 1899, when the novel was first published, reviewers' opinions regarding *The Awakening* were mixed. Although some praised Chopin's novel as an outstanding example of first-rate local-color writing and realistic representation of life, its protagonist, Edna Pontellier, was mainly condemned for her inappropriate sexual behavior and suicide. The depiction of "a dangerous type of modern woman", as Percival Pollard saw Edna Pontellier, "hit a nerve" (Koloski 2008: 162). As a result, the novel did not reach a wide audience and was temporarily almost completely forgotten.

A few decades later, in 1932, Daniel Rankin, a Roman Catholic priest, published a first Kate Chopin biography. Although admiring Chopin for her remarkable writing skills, as critics had already done before him, Rankin viewed *The Awakening* primarily from his conservative position as a priest, calling the book an "unfortunate mistake" (Koloski 2008: 164).

In the 1950s and 60s Kate Chopin's novel was heavily discussed by a new generation of scholars who did not accept and repeat, but rather strongly criticized what had been said by Rankin and his precursors. In their opinion, *The Awakening* "spoke powerfully to their times" (Koloski 2008: 164) and people needed to be encouraged to read the novel. One of the most important contributions of that time was made by Larzer Ziff with his 1966 study *The American 1890s: Life and Times of a Lost Generation* in which he stated that

> *The Awakening*, […], was the most important piece of fiction about the sexual life of a woman written to date in America […] It did not attack the institution of the family, but it rejected the family as the automatic equivalent of feminine self-fulfilment, and on the very eve of the twentieth century it raised the question of what woman was to do with the freedom she struggled toward (Koloski 2008: 165).

Unlike previous scholars, Larzer Ziff did neither condemn the novel's female protagonist for her sexuality, nor did he view *The Awakening* within the context of local-color writing or realism. Instead, he was the first to focus on the problematic situation of women in society depicted in the novel.

Shortly afterwards, Per Seyersted, one of the major Chopin scholars, strongly influenced the novel's today reputation with his 1969 critical study entitled *The Complete Works of Kate Chopin.* In his work Seyersted analyzed *The Awakening* in connection with Kate Chopin's one hundred short stories and came to the conclusion that all texts show similar themes and motifs. According to Seyersted (1969, cited in Koloski 2008: 166), Chopin's masterpiece as well as her stories clearly display "a discreet feminist touch" in the sense that she addresses topics, such as "the amoral treatment of sexuality, of divorce, and of woman's urge for an existential authenticity". Based on his observation, Seyersted places Kate Chopin in the canon of "women's fiction".

During the women's movement of the 1970s *The Awakening* experienced a revival. Although written in 1899, the novel reflected the zeitgeist and the needs of contemporary women "inviting the reader to imagine a world in which woman's experience and desire are no longer marginalized and effaced but have become critically central" (Papke 1990, cited in Koloski 2008: 168).

It was also in the 1970s when Emily Toth started working in the fields of women's studies and fiction, and much of what is known today about Kate Chopin's life and writing is based on her research. Publishing the *Kate Chopin Newsletter* between 1975 and 1977, the most recent and most influential Chopin scholar has since then produced numerous articles, conference presentations as well as two biographies entitled *Kate Chopin: A Life* (1990) and *Unveiling Kate Chopin* (1999). Primarily examining how Chopin's life influenced her writing,

Toth argues that "embedded in her Louisiana short stories and in *The Awakening*, was the romance of her life", referring to an affair Kate Chopin had with a local planter in Cloutierville, "– the man she loved, then left behind, in pursuit of something that mattered much more. At a critical moment in her life, Kate Chopin had made the same choice that Edna Pontellier makes: She chose herself" (1990, cited in Koloski 2008: 169).

Since the novel's publication extensive research has been done on Chopin's masterpiece, choosing different approaches to *The Awakening* and examining a variety of subject matters. In particular, the interpretation of Edna's suicide at the end of the novel has posed a challenge to many contemporary scholars, and opinions vary markedly. Frequently romanticized as a necessary act to gain absolute freedom and liberate herself from the limiting network of social relationships (M. Culley), Edna's drowning has also been viewed as a sentimental lapse (G. Spangler) or even defeat (D. Ringe) (cf. Martin 1988: 13f.).

3.2 The Yellow Wallpaper

"Together with *The Awakening* it is probably the most well-known rediscovered work by a nineteenth-century American woman" (Hedges 1992: 319). Republished in the 1960s and '70s as a manifesto of the Women's Movement, "The Yellow Wallpaper" has become a widely studied text in the American literary canon with more than two dozen critical studies. In particular, two aspects of Gilman's work have aroused the interest of numerous critics: the eponymous wallpaper and the story's ending.

As the story's key metaphor, the wallpaper allows various ways of reading it. The earlier critics (1973-1981) of Gilman's story believed the wallpaper to represent the oppressive social, but also psychic structures of the woman's world that the narrator-protagonist achieves to free herself from (cf. Hedges 1992: 321).

In "Monumental Feminism and Literature's Ancestral House: Another Look at 'The Yellow Wallpaper'", Janice Haney-Peritz offers a slightly different viewpoint, arguing that the wallpaper does not reflect the oppressive social structures of society, but rather the oppressive structures of male discourse against

which a woman rebels to "author her own sentences" as Paula Treichler adds (cf. Hedges 1992: 321f.).

Newer studies focus on how to read certain features of the wallpaper, in particular its disturbing yellow color and smell, with a number of critics (Juliann Fleenor, Jeffrey Berman, Mary Jacobus, Marianne deKoven, William Veeder, Linda Wagner-Martin) concluding that both are symbols of the female protagonist's "sexual fear and disgust" as well as her "morbid fears of motherhood and reproduction" (Hedges 1992: 323f.).

In her essay "Feminist Criticism, 'The Yellow Wallpaper', and the Politics of Color in America" (1990), Susan Lanser suggested a completely different approach to reading Gilman's story. In her opinion, "The Yellow Wallpaper" is "not a woman's story with some essential 'female meaning'" (Hedges 1992: 324). The wallpaper neither depicts the oppressive patriarchal structures of society, nor are its color and smell a sign of the protagonist's repressed sexuality. The wallpaper and its imagery are rather "a reflection of the nation's obsession, at the turn of the century, with issues of race, due to the massive immigration at the time from southern and eastern Europe and Asia […]" (Hedges 1992: 325).

Summarizing the wallpaper's complex nature, Hedges (1992: 320) states that it represents "the medical, marital, maternal, psychological, sexual, sociocultural, political, and linguistic situation of its narrator-protagonist", functions "as an image of the situation of the woman writer" and provides "a way of understanding the dilemmas of female authorship", "reveals the relations between gender and reading and gender and writing" and describes "the problems of female self-representation".

As mentioned before, similar to Edna's suicide in *The Awakening*, also the fate of "The Yellow Wallpaper's" female protagonist has been a controversial issue. Critics have frequently discussed whether the story's finale has to be interpreted as the narrator-protagonist's ultimate triumph or her absolute defeat. Depending on how the behavior of husband and wife is read towards the end of the story, both options seem plausible. Whereas the woman's crawling on the

floor has been viewed as a sign of rebirth and liberation resulting from a successful search for meaning in the paper, it has also been interpreted as a regressive act of returning to a condition of childishness and infantilism. Also her husband's fainting has divided critics: Some have presumed the female protagonist has outwitted him, others have assumed the contrary to be the case – that by refusing to listen to her, he has outwitted her (cf. Hedges 1992: 320).

Depending on how the meaning of the wallpaper and the story's ending is interpreted, the protagonist's status as a feminist heroine is either retained or undermined. So while we may have lost a feminist heroine and although the 'essential female meaning' of the story has been questioned, "The Yellow Wallpaper" continues to be read as a feminist text by the majority of critics.

4. AMERICAN VICTORIANISM

Named after Queen Victoria, who reigned over Britain for sixty four years (1837-1901), the Victorian Age was a complex era of dramatic change and growth that did not only transform the lives and attitudes of the British people, but also those of Americans.

Economic as well as social developments caused by the Industrial Revolution as well as findings and theories by Darwin, Drysdale, and Mills influenced the two countries to the same extent. Regarding these simultaneous processes in addition to more obvious common features, such as the same language, moral standards and culture, one can speak of such a concept as 'American Victorianism' as suggested by Howe, who explains:

> Victorianism was a transatlantic culture – though in the largest sense it was only an English-speaking subculture of Western civilization. Inevitably, the English-speakers within the Western world shared many common influences, which were reinforced by expansion of printed communication during the 1830s and the subsequent laying of the transatlantic cable (1975, cited in von Heynitz 1994: 101f.).

Printed communication and the transatlantic cable, however, did not remain the only innovations to change English and American society. Towards the end of the 19th century radio shortwaves were produced (1887), wireless telegraphy was invented (1895), radiation was discovered by the Curies (1897), and the Brother's Wright built the first successful airplane (1903). These new technologies turned America into a world power with growing national wealth and increasing materialism, into a nation where "the mid-nineteenth-century Civil 'War for freedom' had been replaced by the 'war for the dollar'" (Gilbert/ Gubar 1985/1996: 964).

Along with a growing sense of materialism, America's longing for expansion developed. Having subjugated the Native Americans and built the transcontinental railroad in the 1860s to more easily control the western wilderness, America's want of national growth finally led to the Spanish-American War in 1898. Due to the colonization of Hawaii, Puerto Rico, the Philippines and Cuba, the population of America grew substantially for the

second time in the century as an enormous growth in US size and population had already been recognizable between the 1840s and 1870.

Urban expansion, mass immigration, fast technological development as well as the aftermaths of the Civil War led to an ever-increasing insecurity in the population that feared problems of adjustment and thus "a possible breakdown in an established communal order" (Mills 1992: XIV). In order to maintain a sense of stability within American society "firm moral training" had to be created in all spheres of life, such as "schools, churches, entertainment and recreation". Also literature was meant to propagate a "morally uplifting" (Mills 1992: XVII) message.

Not only firm moral training, but also the home was regarded as an important source of stability in the nineteenth century. It was perceived to be "a refuge from the bustle of the workplace" whose "chief minister" (Golden 2004: 9) was the woman with her high moral standards and purity. The "Angel in the House" (von Heynitz 1994: 104) as referred to by Patmore was a symbol for identity and continuity. In order to sustain this continuity in society it was therefore necessary that women remained within the domestic sphere; the public sphere belonged to men.

4.1 The situation of women

In the Victorian age, however, the attitude of regarding women only as wives and mothers, who are responsible for the home and the family's well-being, was not perceived to be oppressive. Rather, housework and child-rearing were believed to be satisfying activities for what was considered a true woman. These activities could not be referred to as 'work', they were rather "the natural expression of [her] inherently giving, nurturant character" (Wynn 1988: 15). The true woman, as exaggeratedly described in John Cordy Jeaffreson's novel *A Woman in Spite of Herself* (1872), was content with her role as an "enthusiastic slave of the man to whom she has given her heart" (Gilbert/ Gubar 1985/1996: 968).

Domesticity, however, was not the only characteristic expected from a proper woman. Above all, respectability was seen as a central Victorian norm,

including the doctrine of female a-sexuality. According to this common belief, a woman was considered a passionless being who experienced sex to be a self-sacrificial rather than an enjoyable act. Given the opportunities of medical care in the Victorian period, "it is not surprising that many women associated sex with pain rather than pleasure. [.] birth control was uncertain at best, and death from the complications of numerous pregnancies or in childbirth was frequent" (Martin 1988: 16).

The Victorian ideal of domesticity, subservience, renunciation as well as purity and chastity remained unchanged for quite a long time, especially in the South where after the Civil War people wanted to return to 'the good old way of living' and its associated values. The obviously unequal status between the sexes started to be challenged only in late nineteenth century America, when the role of women began to shift slightly. Due to the growing industry, an ever-increasing number of lower-class-women entered into the labor force, which widened not only their sphere, but also granted them a greater amount of freedom. Simultaneously, educational opportunities for women increased as well. Patmore's 'Angel in the House' became an endangered species. The line that once strictly separated the territories of men and women was suddenly blurred, and both sexes started competing for similar duties and interests. This process triggered not only men's fear of job competition, but also of power loss.

Therefore women who longed for some sense of independence were considered to be sick and unnatural. In an 1893 article entitled "Good and Bad Mothers" that was published in *The North American Review*, Amelia E. Barr clearly stated her viewpoint on the matter of the 'liberated woman':

> If they [women] have assumed the position of wifehood, it is a monstrous thing to hold themselves degraded by its consequences; or to consider the care of children a waste of their own life. The world can do without learned women, but it cannot do without good wives and mothers; and when married women prefer to be social ornaments and intellectual amateurs, they may be called philanthropists and scholars, but they are nevertheless moral failures, and bad mothers (Barr 1893/2004: 21f.).

Women who wished to enter the public sphere were not only denounced as bad mothers, but also seen as unable to participate and 'survive' in this sphere due

to their purity and fragile nature. Women's virtues were perceived to be obstacles that would prevent them from taking on an active role in society. Many anti-suffragists, for instance James McGrigor Allan, even described women as invalids and their viewpoint was shared by a large number of male physicians of this period, such as Charlotte Perkins Gilman's medical practitioner S. Weir Mitchell who "sought to demonstrate not only that menstruation, pregnancy, and lactation turned women into helpless invalids but also that higher education and physical or even mental labor would damage women's health" (Gilbert/ Gubar 1985/1996: 969). Interestingly, however, "in the working classes, […], work went on during menstruation without intermission, and, as a rule, without ill effects" (Ehrenreich/ English 1992: 97) hinting at the fact that the phenomenon of 'female invalidism' was nothing more than a feeble excuse. On the one hand, it was a means to "exhaust" the bank accounts of upper- and upper-middle-class husbands by prescribing expensive forms of medical treatment. On the other hand, 'female invalidism' was an option to maintain the decorative function of one's wife. Showing that one was able to afford a totally leisured wife was a symbol for a man's success. It "gave [him] the "class" that money could not provide" (Ehrenreich/ English 1992: 92).

These ideas, however, only contributed to women's growing rebelliousness and fuelled the "battle between the sexes" (Gilbert/ Gubar 1985/1996: 970). In literature two new concepts of women emerged: the femme fatale, a "seductive rebel", and the New Woman "who regarded marriage as incompatible with her emancipation but who just as frequently suffered a tragic penalty for her views" (ibid.).

For the analysis of Kate Chopin's *The Awakening* the concept of the 'New Woman' is relevant. The discussion of Gilman's "The Yellow Wallpaper" deals with the Victorian idea of the madwoman who, more or less, represents the counterpart of the 'Angel in the House' as "through her illness she had exempted herself from her socially prescribed duties of childbearing, childrearing, and home management" (Gilbert/ Gubar 1985/1996: 969).

5. FEMALE CONCEPTS

The following part of this thesis examines the various social constructs of women in late Victorian society represented in *The Awakening* and "The Yellow Wallpaper".

5.1 Female concepts in THE AWAKENING[1]

5.1.1 Adèle Ratignolle: the 'Southern lady'

Adèle Ratignolle embodies everything one would expect from a woman of her social position: She is a selfless, loving mother and wife, who puts her family and their needs first. In contrast to Edna, she considers caring for her family to be a privilege, not a burden. Therefore, Adèle clearly resembles the ideal of the 'Southern lady' as well as Patmore's concept of the 'Angel in the House'. In *The Awakening* Chopin refers to the character of Adèle Ratignolle as the typical, and probably worst of all, 'mother-woman':

> The mother-women seemed to prevail that summer at Grand Isle. It was easy to know them, fluttering about with extended, protecting wings when any harm, real or imaginary, threatened their precious brood. They were women who idolized their children, worshiped their husbands, and esteemed it a holy privilege to efface themselves as individuals and grow wings as ministering angels. […] one of them was the embodiment of every womanly grace and charm. […] Her name was Adèle Ratignolle (TA, 10).

Madame Ratignolle is, no doubt, a positive figure. She is described as "the embodiment of every womanly grace and charm." The frequent use of irony in describing her character, however, may suggest that this type of 'mother-woman' is not taken completely seriously. *The Awakening*'s 'Angel in the House' even grows wings in the extract above, which makes Adèle appear rather like an overprotective mother hen than a graceful angel. Whether this ironic viewpoint is Edna's or Mrs. Chopin's is hard to determine (cf. Ruland 1987: 125). Either way, it does not mean to denigrate the 'mother-women', but simply expresses the opinion that being reduced to the role of mother and wife may not be satisfying for every woman (cf. von Heynitz 1994: 104).

The analysis is based on:

[1] Chopin, Kate (2008). *The Awakening and Other Stories*. Ed. Pamela Knights. Oxford World's Classics. Oxford u.a.: Oxford University Press.

Adèle obviously seems content with this fairly limiting role. She sees her purpose in life in raising a family, and completely defines herself by her children and her ability to reproduce. Lant (1987: 120) even describes her as a person "without a self." Edna finds Madame Ratignolle's sense of self quite odd and considers her constant talk about her condition and pregnancy to be inappropriate, which may be either due to her personality or her different background. In contrast to the other female characters of the novel, Edna is not a Creole. This topic, however, is discussed in more detail in the following chapter (see: society and marriage).

> Madame Ratignolle had been married seven years. About every two years she had a baby. At that time she had three babies, and was beginning to think of a fourth one. She was always talking about her "condition". […] Never would Edna Pontellier forget the shock with which she heard Madame Ratignolle relating to old Monsieur Farival the harrowing story of one of her *accouchements*, withholding no intimate detail (TA, 11f.).

Adèle Ratignolle, apart from being a selfless mother, also possesses a number of other qualities necessary for a Victorian woman of her status: She sews, embroiders and plays the piano.

> She played very well, keeping excellent waltz time and infusing an expression into the strains which was indeed inspiring. She was keeping up her music on account of the children, she said; because she and her husband both considered it as means of brightening the home and making it attractive (TA, 27).

The lines, however, show that Adèle does not play the piano for its own sake or to foster her talents, but first and foremost to entertain and impress others, such as the family's children and friends. In contrast to Edna, who later really aims at earning a living as an artist, Madame Ratignolle presents woman's art solely as "social, pleasant, and undemanding. It does not conflict with her duties as wife and mother and can even be seen to enhance it" as Showalter (1988: 45) underlines (cf. von Heynitz 1994: 105f.).

Adèle's attitude towards making music shows that she is a typical representative of Victorian girls' education which primarily aimed at achieving skills that had a mere decorative function and served to shed a good light on husband and home. Thus, it was basically not the woman who profited from her

skills, but others. A 'lady' and perfect wife stayed in the background. She was not expected to contribute much to a conversation. She was supposed to listen carefully, smile, nod from time to time and agree to what her husband has just said:

> He talked with animation and earnestness that gave an exaggerated importance to every syllable he uttered. His wife was keenly interested in everything he said, laying down her fork the better to listen, chiming in, taking in the words of his mouth (TA, 62f.).

In general, Adèle follows the conversational rules perfectly: She hangs on her husband's every word and sometimes even completes his sentences for him. The couple seems like a symbiotic unit. This exaggerated display of harmony and unity is hard to understand and almost alienating for Edna (cf. von Heynitz 1994: 106):

> [She] felt depressed rather than soothed after leaving [the Ratignolles]. The little glimpse of domestic harmony which had been offered to her, gave her no regret, no longing. It was not a condition of life which fitted her, and she could see in it but an appalling and hopeless ennui. She was moved by a kind of commiseration for Madame Ratignolle, - a pity for that colorless existence which never uplifted its possessor beyond the region of blind contentment, […] (TA, 63).

Although Adèle seems fairly satisfied with the life she leads, Edna strongly disapproves of the Ratignolle's relationship. She criticizes Adèle's "blind contentment" and questions whether a woman in Adèle's position can be truly happy. Edna challenges the role of the 'Southern lady' considering it to be an outdated ideal of femininity. In her opinion, "Adèle is a woman of a passing world and an ancient order" (Lant 1987: 119). Describing her as "the bygone heroine of romance and the fair lady of our dreams" (TA, 10), Edna's doubts become apparent.

Von Heynitz (1994: 104-107) provides a profound characterization of Adèle Ratignolle as THE embodiment of the 'Southern lady'. However, to view Adèle solely as a self-effacing mother and wife seems like a fairly one-sided perspective. Adèle is a more complex character than one initially thinks, and for Edna she represents a powerful mix: Adèle is the typical 'mother-woman' who serves as a role model of how a woman should act according to society. At the same time, she

is also very powerful in terms of her sexuality. She is much more comfortable with her body than Edna. Ruland (1987: 125) even refers to her as a "coquette" who "understands the men in her life and enjoys them."

Although Adèle Ratignolle represents the type of woman Edna refuses to become, it is her, and not the men in Edna's life, who greatly contributes to her final awakening as Lant (1987: 115) notes: "In Adèle, Chopin has created a siren figure who both lures and imperils Edna, a human counterpart to the seductive sea that beckons to Edna's soul, inviting her to swim". Owing to Madame Ratignolle, Edna discovers her inner self and starts questioning her life. The character of Adèle helps Edna reflect on her own experiences and she again becomes aware of the fact that so far she has lived a "dual life – that outward existence which conforms, the inward life which questions" (TA, 16). In the course of the novel one realizes that Edna's "outward existence" is becoming more and more dominated by her "inward life", which is one of the 'symptoms' of the heroine's awakening. In the end, again with Adèle and her plea to "think of the children" (TA, 122), Edna's awakening ends.

5.1.2 Mademoiselle Reisz: the Artist

In contrast to Adèle Ratignolle, Mademoiselle Reisz is an independent woman. She is an unmarried professional piano player with a blunt attitude who does as she pleases and what she considers to be right. Her rude behavior alienates people. Thus, she is not well-liked in the community of vacationers at Grand Isle and the others see her as "a disagreeable [badly dressed] little woman, no longer young, who had quarreled with almost every one, owing to a temper which was self-assertive and a disposition to trample on the rights of others" (TA, 28).

Mademoiselle Reisz, however, could not care less what these others think of her. Several situations confirm that she has a very low opinion of shallow, narrow-minded middle- and upper-class people. One evening, after playing in front of a small audience of guests at Grand Isle, she immediately leaves "stopping for neither thanks nor applause" (TA, 30). Edna is the only person she turns to, uttering: "You are the only one worth playing for. Those others? Bah!" (TA, 30). On another occasion, when Edna unexpectedly visits Mademoiselle

Reisz in her apartment, the artist says: "I sometimes thought: 'She [Edna] will never come. She promised as those women in society always do, without meaning it.'" (TA, 69).

Mademoiselle Reisz's rude behavior can be interpreted in various ways. Quite likely, it is the result of a certain bitterness or feeling of being shunned by her environment for her unusual lifestyle. She chose a path that does not meet the standards of society: Despising a life as mother and wife, she preferred to launch a career as a pianist and aimed at achieving her self-set goals, even if it meant to end up completely alone. This attitude of solely satisfying one's own desires was of course unthinkable, almost scandalous for a woman at the turn of the century. As other people cannot understand and accept her life, Mademoiselle Reisz is quite a private person.

Edna, who is very fond of music, seems to be the only person whom the artist feels a connection to. Edna paints and sketches and both women share a passion for music. Mademoiselle Reisz recognizes Edna's artistic potential and encourages her to believe in herself, follow her heart and pursue her goal of becoming an artist. Speaking from her personal experience, however, Mademoiselle Reisz knows that "to succeed, the artist must possess the courageous soul. […] The brave soul. The soul that dares and defies" (TA, 71). The term 'brave' may have two different meanings in this context: It may either refer to braveness concerning her art (= brave to create something new), or braveness in the sense of what choices one makes in life (= brave to take a risk and allow oneself to be different).

Similar to Adèle, Mademoiselle Reisz is a character of great importance in Chopin's novel and essential for Edna's awakening. Through Adèle Ratignolle, Edna finds her (inner) self and discovers her need for a life without restrictions. She knows that she cannot be one of these 'mother-women' who sacrifice everything for their families. Mademoiselle Reisz, on the other hand, awakens Edna's sensuousness. When she listens to the pianist's music she is deeply moved and "the very passions themselves were aroused within her soul, swaying it, lashing it, as the waves daily beat upon her splendid body. She trembled, she was

choking, and the tears blinded her" (TA, 29f.). According to Ruland (1987: 127), it is also Mademoiselle Reisz's music which awakens Edna's interest in Robert. The same night, after having listened to the artist's music and bathed in the sea, Edna and Robert sit in silence on the porch of the Pontellier's cottage: "No multitude of words could have been more significant than those moments of silence, or more pregnant with the first-felt throbbings of desire" (TA, 34).

Although Adèle Ratignolle is described with a certain touch of irony from time to time, she is generally perceived to be a positive character. Mademoiselle Reisz, on the contrary, is continually referred to as "the pious lady in black". Ruland (1987: 127) even calls her a "deathly figure", which raises the question whether Mademoiselle Reisz has a dangerous potential that could harm Edna. Moreover, Ruland points out that the motif of the serpent appears frequently in Chopin's novel, and that certain serpent-like qualities can be found in the pianist's character too, such as her "wriggling laugh" (TA, 71).

Although Mademoiselle Reisz appears to value Edna's presence and to genuinely like her, serpents are generally known for their deviousness and one becomes unsure about Mademoiselle Reisz's intentions. Bearing in mind that she probably has the deepest insight into Edna's and Robert's relationship, the artist is clearly in a position of power, and she seems to control Edna's feelings as it pleases her. Instead of warning Edna at a certain point of her 'unhealthy' romantic feelings for Robert and the consequences of her behavior, it is Mademoiselle Reisz who "is continually 'creeping up behind' [Edna] intent on prying into, probing and whipping up her emotions" (Heilmann 2008: 99). Otherwise, she would not tell Madame Pontellier about Robert's flattering letter and invite him over the same day that Edna drops by at the pianist's flat. Heilmann (2008: 99) even argues that when "Edna visits her to indulge in daydreams about Robert, Mademoiselle Reisz gains her own voyeuristic gratification from these occasions: 'I should like to know how it affects her' (TA, 70) she muses as she prepares to perform Chopin's 'Impromptu'".

5.1.3 Edna Pontellier: the 'New Woman'?

Adéle Ratignolle and Mademoiselle Reisz embody two possible paths for women to follow in Victorian society. Both are as diverse as the poles and represent two orders of experience: A woman could either choose an artistic life or the traditional role as mother and wife. Artistry granted women a certain amount of freedom, personal as well as social, but usually deprived them of any kind of emotional and physical intimacy. The artist would be 'doomed' to become an old spinster. Choosing the role as wife and mother granted women the warmth of the family and allowed sexual intercourse, but limited them in terms of personal freedom and fulfillment.

Both options have their positive, but also negative sides and it soon becomes clear that there is no model in society for Edna to follow. She simply does not fit in: Adèle's self-effacing life, who "lives to produce and care for children" (Lant 1987: 119), is too constricting for Edna. Mademoiselle Reisz, on the other hand, solely devoted her life to art and religion. She does as she pleases, but as love and passion are absent from her existence, she 'withers away' inevitably. Edna Pontellier is not willing to pay this price either. "To choose one of these extremes of personality as a model is, for Edna, to negate part of herself" (Lant 1987: 121).

Edna cannot conform to the two prevailing concepts of artist and 'mother-woman' as she "is a woman of a new sort" (Lant 1987: 119). The turn of the century was not only characterized by a technological boom, but also an awakening of society. This tendency also found expression in literature where new concepts of women emerged. One of these new female characters was the 'New Woman' who, according to Gilbert and Gubar (1985/1996: 970), "regarded marriage as incompatible with her emancipation but who just as frequently suffered a tragic penalty for her views".

According to Heilmann (2008: 93), Kate Chopin's short stories too display subject matters typical of New Woman fiction: "the importance of female independence, tomboyish heroines who refuse to be feminized, women's conflict between art and love, unconventional marital arrangements, marital oppression, prostitution and congenital syphilis". Also her masterpiece, *The Awakening*,

reveals the "the key concerns" of this genre: "marriage, motherhood" as well as "women's desire for a separate identity and bodily autonomy".

Whether Kate Chopin, who "on her honeymoon assured […] that she would not 'fall into the useless degrading life of most married ladies'" (Heilmann 2008: 92f.), treated Edna Pontellier as the embodiment of the 'New Woman' needs to be discussed in more detail.

5.1.3.1 Physical Activity

Benita von Heynitz (1994: 107) notes that apart from Edna Pontellier's concerns with motherhood and autonomy, Chopin's heroine also displays other characteristics representative of the 'New Woman': Edna's physical activity as she starts to swim and her departure from the restricting Victorian dress code.

Edna's first successful swim in the sea proves to be a life-changing, epiphanic experience for her. For the first time, she is completely in control of her body: "[.] that night she was like the tottering, stumbling, clutching child, who of a sudden realizes its powers, and walks for the first time alone, boldly and with over-confidence" (TA, 31). This experience changes Edna's awareness of herself dramatically. She realizes that physical activity not only strengthens her body, but also her soul: "A feeling of exultation overtook her, as if some power of significant import had been given her to control the working of her body and her soul" (TA, 31).

Edna also becomes aware of her body's potential for pleasure. Shortly afterwards, when she suffers a fit of dizziness during the mass at Chenière Caminada, she is brought to the small house of Madame Antoine in order to rest. Lying half-naked in the bed of a stranger, Edna experiences her body freed from all restrictions for the first time:

> Edna, left alone in the little side room, loosened her clothes, removing the greater part of them. She bathed her face, her neck and arms in the basin that stood between the windows. She took off her shoes and stockings and stretched herself in the very center of the high, white bed. How luxurious it felt to rest thus in a strange, quaint bed, with its sweet country odor of laurel lingering about the sheets and the mattress! She stretched her strong limbs that ached a little. She ran her fingers through her loosened hair for a while. She looked at her round arms as she held them straight up and rubbed them one after the other, observing closely, as if it were something she saw for the first time, the fine, firm quality and texture of her flesh (TA, 41).

Edna enjoys freeing herself from the "portable prison of tight corsets and long skirts" (Ehrenreich/ English 1992: 91) which hardly allows any kind of activity and realizes her body's natural beauty. This development reaches its peak towards the end of the novel when Edna returns to Grand Isle and takes her 'final swim'. Putting on her bathing suit, she realizes how unpleasant and "pricking" it is:

> But when she was there beside the sea, absolutely alone, she cast the unpleasant, pricking garments from her, and for the first time in her life she stood naked in the open air, at the mercy of the sun, the breeze that beat upon her, and the waves that invited her.
> How strange and awful it seemed to stand naked under the sky! how delicious! She felt like some new-born creature, opening its eyes in a familiar world that it had never known (TA, 127).

Edna's act of taking off her clothes and enjoying her nakedness shows that she has clearly overcome her former shyness and is now comfortable with her body. Her attitude towards nakedness and sensuality has changed: She is not ashamed of it any more.

According to Heilmann (2008: 93), one of the reasons for Edna's great attraction to the sea is surely its limitless expanse, which offers welcome release from her feeling of domestic confinement. Edna's long walks through New Orleans seem to serve the same purpose. They widen her horizon not only in spatial terms, but also intellectually: "However, I don't mind walking. I always feel so sorry for women who don't like to walk; they miss so much – so many rare little glimpses of life; and we women learn so little of life on the whole" (TA, 117f.).

5.1.3.2 Female Independence

Madame Pontellier's departure from the restricting Victorian dress code and her physical activities metaphorically express her attempts to gradually free herself from the constricting circumstances in which she lives (cf. von Heynitz 1994: 109). In particular Edna's marriage with Léonce seems to be a strongly limiting factor. Her husband not only lectures Edna on her maternal duties, but also on her general behavior. When Edna returns from the beach, her husband criticizes her for being in the sun too long: ""You are burnt beyond recognition," he added, looking at his wife as one looks at a valuable piece of personal property which has suffered some damage" (TA, 4). On another occasion, "when, half-asleep, [Edna] displays a lack of interest in his conversation, [Léonce] makes her get up on the pretext of one of their son's imaginary illness" (Heilmann 2008: 94).

These two situations at the outset of the novel perfectly exemplify Léonce's attitude towards his wife: Although, on the whole, a courteous and tolerant husband, he expects a certain degree of submissiveness from Edna. In his opinion, he knows best as far as his wife and her lifestyle are concerned. Edna's continuous disregard of his position of power not only upsets Léonce, but is also incomprehensible to him.

Although Edna is annoyed at her husband, who continually tries to control her, she does not voice her discontent, but rather engages in passive resistance: "She said nothing, and refused to answer her husband when he questioned her" (TA, 8). As soon as she acquires the ability to swim, however, Madame Pontellier starts to openly disobey Léonce and utters her feelings and thoughts:

> Another time she would have gone in at his request. She would, through habit, have yielded to his desire; not with any sense of submission or obedience to his compelling wishes, but unthinkingly, as we walk, move, sit, stand, go through the daily treadmill of life which has been portioned out to us. […] She perceived that her will had blazed up, stubborn and resistant. She could not at that moment have done other than denied and resisted […]. "Léonce, go to bed," she said. "I mean to stay out here. I don't wish to go in, and I don't intend to" (TA, 35).

Edna Pontellier is not willing any more to have her life controlled by others, neither by her husband, nor her environment in general. Her changing attitude

becomes apparent when Edna, in a fit of anger, tries to destroy her wedding ring and starts neglecting her social duty of receiving afternoon calls. "She began to do as she liked and to feel as she liked. […] When Mr. Pontellier became rude, Edna grew insolent. She had resolved never to take another step backward" (TA, 63).

Representing a new sort of woman, Edna aims at achieving and maintaining independence. She cannot accept to be "one of Mr. Pontellier's possessions to dispose of or not" (TA, 119) as "she had resolved never again to belong to another than herself" (TA, 89). Therefore, she escapes her husband's physical presence and moves to a small house of her own, the 'pigeon house'. Owing to a small inheritance and her 'profession' as a painter, Edna possesses the financial means to take this step towards independence:

> I have a little money of my own from my mother's estate, which my father sends me by driblets. I won a large sum this winter on the races, and I am beginning to sell my sketches. Laidpore is more and more pleased with my work; he says it grows in force and individuality. I cannot judge of that myself, but I feel that I have gained in ease and confidence. However, as I said, I have sold a good many through Laidpore. I can live in the tiny house for little or nothing, with one servant (TA, 88).

5.1.3.3 Marital Doubts

Edna's act of moving out of her home does not only reflect the 'New Woman's' striving for female independence, but also one of her other main beliefs: not every woman finds fulfillment in marriage. A lifelong bond between a man and a woman is only fulfilling for both partners, if it is founded on the right basis: above all, on love as well as common interests and goals. Edna's marriage, however, proves to lack this basis. She is neither in love with Léonce, nor do the two have anything in common as it turns out later. Using the term 'accident' in order to refer to Edna's marriage seems, therefore, quite justifiable:

> Her marriage to Léonce Pontellier was purely an accident, in this respect resembling many other marriages which masquerade as the decrees of Fate. […] He fell in love, as men are in the habit of doing, and pressed his suit with an earnestness and ardor which left nothing to be desired. He pleased her; his absolute devotion flattered her. She fancied there was sympathy of thought and taste between them, in which fancy she was mistaken. […]

> The acme of bliss, which would have been a marriage with the tragedian, was not for her in this world. As the devoted wife of a man who worshiped her, she felt she would take her place with a certain dignity in the world of reality, closing the portals forever behind her upon the realm of romance and dreams (TA, 21).

Edna is deeply disappointed of what everyday life with Léonce has to offer her. Although he is able to provide well for the family and seems to be a considerate husband, Edna clearly states that their marriage is deprived of any kind of romantic feeling. A marriage with the tragedian, who Edna fancied as a young woman, on the other hand, would have been the "acme of bliss". This idealizing daydream of the tragedian as well as her reveries of the "dignified and sad-eyed cavalry officer" (TA, 20) prove how emotionally immature Edna still is. Although a grown-up woman, she at times appears rather like a teenage girl who is not yet ready to face reality.

Unaware of her feelings for Robert Lebrun, she makes him the next hero of her romantic daydreams. Just like the sun, his presence means light and warmth to Edna and she misses Robert's company when he is not around: "She missed him the days when some pretext served to take him away from her, just as one misses the sun on a cloudy day without having thought much about it when it was shining" (TA, 30). Later on in the novel, shortly before Robert's departure to Mexico, his early absence deeply pains Edna and she becomes aware of her real feelings for Robert Lebrun. An emotion arises which Edna Pontellier had thought long forgotten: "For the first time she recognized anew the symptoms of infatuation which she felt incipiently as a child, as a girl in her earliest teens, and later as a young woman" (TA, 51). The term 'infatuation', however, carries primarily negative connotations. In contrast to 'passion', a powerful feeling of love, it solely refers to a feeling of love or attraction which is usually not long-lasting. Therefore one is tempted to question the seriousness of Edna's feelings.

5.1.3.4 Motherhood

Edna Pontellier is not only an emotionally distant wife, but also appears to be an unenthusiastic mother. Unlike Madame Ratignolle, who enjoys being surrounded by her children, Edna considers the periodical absences of her sons to

be a relief: "It seemed to free her of a responsibility which she had blindly assumed and for which Fate had not fitted her" (TA, 22). Although she frequently utters her 'fondness', a liking, for her children, Edna gives the impression to lack the genuine deep feelings most mothers have for their offspring.

Also Léonce, her husband, seems to be aware of his wife's indifference towards their sons. Criticizing Edna for her "inattention" and "habitual neglect of the children" (TA, 8), Léonce voices that "it would have been a difficult matter […] to define to his own satisfaction or any one else's wherein his wife failed in her duty towards her children. It was something which he felt rather than perceived […]" (TA, 10). In contrast to the other children at Grand Isle, however, the Pontellier boys seem to be quite self-sufficient for their age. Although criticized by her husband, Edna's semi-detached form of mothering apparently makes her sons more independent and self-assured than many of their peers: "If one of [them] took a tumble whilst at play, he was not apt to rush crying to his mother's arms for comfort; he would more likely pick himself up, wipe the water out of his eyes and the sand out of his mouth, and go on playing" (TA, 10).

Edna Pontellier's neglect of her two sons may indicate that her motherhood was rather 'compulsory' than 'voluntary'. A married woman, Edna was expected to have children and raise a family: Being a mother was not the role she chose for herself. As a result, her sons now appear to be a "collectivity representing a duty" (Heilmann 2008: 96) "for which Fate had not fitted her" (TA, 22). In contrast to other women, who consider having children a life-enriching experience, Edna sees it as a "source of entrapment" (Foster 1986: 164), a burden that requires something she is not willing to give: "[…] [I] would never sacrifice [my]self for [my] children […]. 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" (TA, 53). Towards the end of the novel, she even refers to Raoul and Etienne as her "antagonists" who prevent her from achieving her freedom: "The children appeared before her like antagonists who had overcome her; who had overpowered and sought to drag her into the soul's slavery for the rest of her days" (TA, 127).

In this respect – compulsory versus voluntary motherhood – *The Awakening* shows an affinity with a series of other New Woman texts which pointed out the importance of sexual self-ownership during a period when "married women had no legal rights over their bodies" and were, therefore, not entitled to "refuse sex to [their] husband[s]" (Heilmann 2008: 88/ 94).

5.1.3.5 Tomboyish Behavior

After Robert's departure to Mexico, Edna tries to compensate his absence by concentrating on her painting, visiting horse races and betting. She starts to show a new side of herself and behaves rather differently. Edna seems to be at ease, is outgoing and even masculine at times. According to Heilmann (2008: 93), New Woman fiction often centers around "tomboyish heroines who refuse to be feminized". In Chopin's *The Awakening* the contrary is the case: At the outset of the novel, Edna Pontellier primarily acts according to society's standards. In her process of emancipation, however, she develops certain masculine qualities.

Edna's drinking behavior changes: "She opened a bottle of beer which she found in the ice-box" (TA, 83) and "she drank the liquor from the glass as a man would have done" (TA, 87). At the races, she prefers the company of men and 'brags' with her profound knowledge of horses: "There were possibly a few track men out there who knew the race horse as well as Edna, but here was certainly none who knew it better. She sat between her two companions as one having authority to speak" (TA, 82). Edna Pontellier also becomes more masculine in terms of her sexual behavior.

This development is associated with one of Edna's new acquaintances: Alcée Arobin, a good-looking, well-dressed 'rake'. With Alcée, Edna experiences "the first kiss of her life to which her nature [.] really respond[s]" (TA, 92). "It [is] not the kiss of love", however, "which [.] inflame[s] her" (TA, 93), but pure lust. Her unexpected physical reaction causes Edna to feel guilty and she realizes that she may fall victim to her own uncontrollable passion, if she does not change her life. Nevertheless, Edna does not regret Alcée's kiss as she is no longer ashamed of her physical longings (cf. von Heynitz 1994: 112ff.).

Madame Pontellier's short affair with Alcée can be considered to be a maturation process. In contrast to Robert, with whom she experiences the romantic love absent from her marital life, Alcée Arobin awakens Edna's sexuality: "He had detected the latent sensuality, which unfolded under his delicate sense of her nature's requirements like a torpid, torrid, sensitive blossom" (TA, 116). Owing to Alcée, Edna seems braver towards the end of the novel and ready to finally gain bodily autonomy. Strongly deviating from the Victorian ideal of the sexually passive woman, Edna takes the dominant part and seduces Robert: "She leaned over and kissed him – a soft, cool, delicate kiss whose voluptuous sting penetrated his whole being – then she moved away from him. He followed, and took her in his arms, just holding her close to him" (TA, 118). In making her own decisions, in particular regarding her choice of men, Edna again acts according to the principles of the 'New Woman'.

5.1.3.6 Death

Edna Pontellier's final act of committing suicide draws another parallel between *The Awakening*'s heroine and other 'New Woman' characters: She "suffer[s] a tragic penalty for her views" (Gilbert/ Gubar 1985/1996: 970) and moral conduct. The topic of Edna's death, however, is discussed in more detail in the final chapter of this thesis (see: adultery-ennui-suicide).

5.1.3.7 Edna in contrast to the 'New Woman'

Although, in the course of the novel, Edna Pontellier develops certain characteristics which reflect the principles of the 'New Woman', Edna also shows a number of qualities in which she deviates from this new female concept.

In contrast to Edna Pontellier, the 'New Woman' consciously decides to take another direction in life: She is well aware of her actions and their consequences and certain about her feelings for and her relationships with the people in her environment. The 'New Woman' is a steady character. Edna, however, seems rather erratic and acts impulsively. Already towards the beginning of the novel, when Robert tries to convince her to take a swim, this character trait becomes apparent:

> 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 (TA, 15).

Also Edna's relationship with her children is referred to as rather impulsive and reflects her emotional uncertainty: "She was fond of her children in an uneven, impulsive way. She would sometimes gather them passionately to her heart; she would sometimes forget them" (TA, 21).

It appears as if Edna is a person who is solely guided by her emotions and moods. Not reflecting on her own behavior, she does not bear in mind how it affects others. This lack of self-control and -awareness is also criticized by Madame Ratignolle: "In some way you seem to me like a child, Edna. You seem to act without a certain amount of reflection which is necessary in this life" (TA, 106) (cf. von Heynitz 1994: 124). Adèle's statement underlines Edna's immaturity which was mentioned in a previous section regarding her infatuations with the cavalry officer, the tragedian and Robert.

Edna, however, does not manage to change her way of acting or does not even attempt to. She keeps ignoring the consequences of her behavior and continues to live for the 'here and now': "The past was nothing to her; offered no lesson which she was willing to heed. The future was a mystery which she never attempted to penetrate. The present alone was significant" (TA, 51) (cf. von Heynitz 1994: 125). Edna "was blindly following whatever impulse moved her, as if she had placed herself in alien hands for direction, and freed her soul of responsibility" (TA, 36).

Von Heynitz (1994: 128) also argues that, in contrast to the 'New Woman', Edna's life seems to be dominated by men. Her existence and well-being very much center on men and her feelings for them: Her youth and early adulthood are irrevocably connected with her admiration for the cavalry officer and the talented tragedian. Later, Robert takes their place as Edna's 'object of desire' and gives the indifferent wife and mother a new purpose and orientation in life. After his departure to Mexico, her increased interest in horse racing and art is just a means

to an end: Edna tries to compensate Robert's absence and distract herself while waiting for his return. Foster (1986: 167), sharing this opinion, notes: "Edna's yearnings for self-expansion are chiefly centered on conventional romantic ideals".

"When the weather," however, "[is] dark and cloudy Edna [cannot] work. She need[s] the sun to mellow and temper her mood to the sticking point" (TA, 81). Traditionally seen as the symbol of male power, the sun already before has been identified with Robert's presence. When he is not around, Edna does not 'function'. Therefore, the young man can be considered Edna's "driving force of life. Like the moon, she lacks the ability to generate her own light and energy" (Martin 1988: 22). Thus, Edna, like Madame Ratignolle, displays very traditional female character traits. She hopes for a fulfilling relationship with the man she loves, who plays the dynamic part in her life and guides her.

Whether Edna Pontellier can be treated as the embodiment of the 'New Woman' is difficult to decide. Clearly developing certain characteristics typical of the 'New Woman' in the course of the novel, Edna also deviates from this female concept in a number of qualities. Referring to Edna's surname, Pontellier, which translated into English means 'bridge-maker' (Knights 2008: 362), one could argue that *The Awakening*'s heroine represents neither a "woman of a passing world" (Lant 1987: 119), as Adèle does, nor belongs to the group of 'New Women' yet. The character of Edna Pontellier rather bridges "the traditional affiliative, instrumental, feminine mode and the aggressive, autonomous ideals of the new woman" (Martin 1988: 25).

5.2 Female concepts in THE YELLOW WALLPAPER[2]

5.2.1 The Madwoman

"The Yellow Wallpaper's" female protagonist very closely resembles the typical Victorian woman: She is a young wife and mother who is completely dependent on her husband. Owing to her domestic life, she has no income and therefore lacks the financial means to provide for herself. Her sex, in addition, does not allow her to make any decisions on her own. Based on personal experiences, Charlotte Perkins Gilman managed to create a very authentic female first-person narrator-protagonist.

After giving birth to her first child, she suffers from postpartum psychosis: She is exhausted, overemotional due to hormonal change and overwhelmed by the new situation. While nowadays this is considered a widespread and severe mental illness after childbirth, her husband, a physician, diagnoses her with "a slight hysterical tendency" (TYW, 42). "Hysteria" was a quite common interpretation of all sorts of women's illnesses in the nineteenth century, although the symptoms varied greatly, as Bauer (1998: 42) argues. According to Gilbert and Gubar (1985/1996: 969), many physicians believed hysteria to lie within every woman's nature due to the word's etymology, 'hyster' being the Greek root for womb. Not taking his wife's condition seriously, John, the heroine's husband seems to share this common 19th-century belief. In his opinion, a little bit of rest and fresh air are sufficient to cure the woman's fit of 'hysteria'.

The husband's disrespectful attitude towards his wife's illness as well as Gilman's character choice and depiction in general, indicate the short story's patriarchal theme. According to Ford (1985: 309) the "The Yellow Wallpaper's" heroine even "dwells in the middle of Patriarchy":

The analysis is based on:

[2] Perkins Gilman, Charlotte (1998). *The Yellow Wallpaper*. Ed. Dale M. Bauer. A Bedford Cultural Edition. Boston u.a.: Bedford Books.

> She is living in "ancestral halls", has just given birth to a boy, is surrounded by men – her husband, her brother, and somewhere in the background, Weir Mitchell – and even the female or females in the house appear to be cardboard figures cut out by the patriarchy (Ford 1985: 309).

Both women are indeed described in a stereotypically female, domestic way and resemble the ideal 'Angel in the House': While Mary is "so good with the baby" (TYW, 44), Jennie, John's sister, "is a perfect and enthusiastic housekeeper, and hopes for no better profession". She considers female intellectual activity 'unhealthy' and thinks "it is the writing which made [Gilman's narrator-protagonist] sick" (TYW, 47). According to Horner and Zlosnik (1990: 34), the unhealthy nature of female intellectual activity was a widespread belief. It was assumed that "the desire to write […] might destroy [a woman's] 'natural' tendencies towards domesticity and motherhood: The woman artist" was, therefore, seen as "abnormal" and "something to be abhorred".

Also Gilman's choice of character names underlines the patriarchal theme of the short story: While the woman's husband and physician is referred to as John, the female protagonist remains unnamed throughout the story. The lack of a name deprives the woman of her individuality and makes her appear interchangeable. Her personal story may be likely to happen to any woman. The nanny, Mary, carries the name of the virgin mother and Jennie, may also refer to a "female donkey or beast of burden" (Ford 1985: 309).

Gilman's narrator-protagonist is thankful to have Mary and Jennie around, but the situation weighs heavily on her. Instead of helping John, she is a "comparative burden" (TYW, 44) to him, unable to fulfill her expected duties as wife and mother: She is too exhausted to run the household and also unable to "be with [the baby]" as "it makes [her] so nervous" (TYW, 44). Thus, "through her illness she [.] exempt[s] herself from her socially prescribed duties of childbearing, childrearing and home management" (Gilbert/ Gubar 1985/1996: 696).

Considering the series of events in Gilman's "The Yellow Wallpaper", one could argue that it portrays the development from the stereotypical female concept

of the 'weak sex' to the 'madwoman' due to an ever-growing sense of male oppression. Whether the protagonist's final state of insanity can be interpreted as an attempt to free herself from the limiting conditions in a patriarchal society or as punishment "as the only alternative to marriage, motherhood, and conformity" (Ford 1985: 313), deserves further evaluation (see: insanity).

5.3 Résumé

Kate Chopin's *The Awakening* and Charlotte Perkins Gilman's "The Yellow Wallpaper" provide a clear picture of the social constructs of women prevailing among the middle and upper classes of Victorian society towards the end of the nineteenth century. "[…] delineating the serene mother, the beautiful siren, the devoted wife, the eccentric artist" (Horner/ Zlosnik 1990: 1) as well as the concept of the 'weak sex'. Both women writers question well-established ideas of womanhood and criticize Victorian patriarchal society and woman's place within it. In creating the characters of Edna Pontellier and "The Yellow Wallpaper's" female narrator-protagonist, Chopin and Gilman point out the necessity for the emergence of new female role models: Women who resist conforming to their contemporaries' ideas of femininity; who seek control of their own destiny and find a way to cope with the pressures of patriarchal society.

6. A SENSE OF CAPTIVITY

The following part of this thesis calls attention to the social and physical barriers that establish the protagonists' positions as captives of their environment, and explains how these forms of captivity are depicted in Chopin's novel and Gilman's short story.

6.1 A sense of captivity in THE AWAKENING

6.1.1 The Bird Motif

Throughout the *The Awakening* the bird image and the motif of flight are used several times: The novel starts with a caged parrot and mockingbird; while listening to a piece of music, Edna imagines a naked man who looks at a distant bird; Mlle Reisz cautions Edna Pontellier that "the bird that would soar above the level plain of tradition and prejudice must have strong wings" (TA, 93); and the novel closes with the image of a bird with a broken wing.

6.1.1.1 The Parrot

Already in the opening paragraphs of *The Awakening* an atmosphere of captivity is created. The reader is introduced to Mr. Pontellier, who is seated on Madame Lebrun's porch, "unable to read his newspaper" (TA, 3), because of the annoying voice of a caged parrot:

> A green and yellow parrot, which hung in a cage outside the door, kept repeating over and over: "Allez vous-en! Allez vous-en! Sapristi! That's all right!" He could speak a little Spanish, and also a language which nobody understood, unless it was the mocking-bird that hung on the other side of the door, whistling his fluty notes out upon the breeze with maddening persistence (TA, 3).

Introducing the metaphors of captivity and freedom, the caged parrot not only represents Edna Pontellier's, but the situation of Victorian women in general. Like the parrot, the sphere of women towards the end of the 19th century was limited: They did not have the freedom to go anywhere they pleased, but were rather confined to domesticity. Expected to behave according to the strict standards of a patriarchal society, women's lives were characterized by subservience. Just like the caged bird, they were forced to repeat the words of their husbands or other male members of society. When uttering their own

thoughts and feelings, they frequently remained misunderstood or were not taken seriously. Their language was "[one] which nobody understood" (TA, 3) and which was solely considered annoying. When women's company thus "ceased to be entertaining", men "had the privilege of quitting their society" (TA, 3) and retire, for instance, "to a game of billiards" (TA, 5) 'with their equals'. The only audience willing to listen to and understand the needs of self-effacing mothers and wives were other women who, in Chopin's novel, are symbolized by the equally caged mockingbird.

The elegant houses, described in *The Awakening* and also "The Yellow Wallpaper", therefore, represent "cages for intelligent women" (Horner/ Zlosnik 1990: 55). Similar to Gilman's nursery in the attic, the Lebrun household too "from the outside" resembles "a prison, with iron bars before the door and lower windows" (TA, 66). Described as "a relic of the old regime" (ibid.), the iron bars symbolize the oppressive nature of late Victorian patriarchal society: Although outdated, "no one had ever thought of dislodging them" (ibid.). Horner and Zlosnik (1990: 55) further argue that the two caged birds do not solely stand for the situation of late 19th-century women, but rather represent "all peoples confined and colonized by a dominant race or sex" who had the language and culture of their 'colonizers' forced on them.

Heath (1994/2004: 86) offers a slightly different perspective making a connection between the shrill voice of the parrot and the voice of the sea: In his opinion, "between the two, parrot and sea, there is the whole process – the substance – of Chopin's writing, the difficult course of Edna's desire for herself, reaching out "for the unlimited"". While the parrot's unintelligible language at the outset of the novel marks Edna Pontellier's inability to conform to the female concepts accepted in Victorian society, and her state of being misunderstood by her environment, the voice of the sea, the "language of awakening sensuousness" (Heath 1994/2004: 88), "speaks to [her] soul," and she identifies with it. It is "seductive; never ceasing, whispering, clamoring, murmuring, inviting the soul to wander for a spell in abysses of solitude; […]. The touch of the sea is sensuous, enfolding the body in its soft, close embrace" (TA, 16/ 127).

6.1.1.2 The Naked Man on the Seashore

In chapter 9, Kate Chopin uses the bird image for the second time: While listening to Madame Ratignolle playing a piano piece which Edna calls "Solitude", "the figure of a [naked] man standing beside a desolate rock on the seashore" comes "before her imagination. […] His attitude [is] one of hopeless resignation as he look[s] toward a distant bird winging its flight away from him" (TA, 29). According to Ruland (1987: 130), "the man in Edna's vision appears to have sensed his lonely role in his bleak universe". He is lonely, but as to my opinion, Edna's vision represents ultimate freedom: Naked and alone, the man, like in reality, is neither limited in his actions by clothing, nor society.

Madame Pontellier's imagined scene stands in contrast to the final chapter of *The Awakening*: While the man is in a mood of hopeless resignation, Edna, too naked, is overwhelmed and "[feels] like some new-born creature" (TA, 127). She is, however, accompanied by "a bird with a broken wing [that is] beating the air above, reeling, fluttering, circling disabled down to the water" (TA, 127), thus foretelling Edna Pontellier's fate.

Interestingly, while the man has already gained self-awareness, Edna is just "beginning to realize her position in the universe as a human being". Due to the progressive form one never finds out whether she ever accomplishes this process as "the beginning of things, of a world especially, is necessarily vague, tangled, chaotic, and exceedingly disturbing. How few of us ever emerge from such beginning! How many souls perish in its tumult!" (TA, 16). The bird with the broken wing may therefore symbolize that Edna fails in her attempt to fully gain self-awareness, "psychologically if not physically [wounded] by the conditions of her world" (Foster 1986: 166).

Birds, unable to fly, are also present when Mlle Reisz warns Edna that she must be strong and prepared to face possible difficulties in her environment if people find out about her feelings for Robert: "The bird that would soar above the level plain of tradition and prejudice must have strong wings. It is a sad spectacle to see the weaklings bruised, exhausted, fluttering back to earth" (TA, 92). The artist's reference to the "bruised weaklings" show that Edna is not the only

married woman infatuated with a man other than her husband. So far, however, Mlle Reisz has only seen women fail in their attempt to satisfy their desire. They were either not brave enough to act on their love, worried about their appearance and therefore stayed with their families, or returned as 'fallen women' in which case they alone had to take the consequences for their unacceptable behavior, while their lovers were never blamed.

Also Kate Chopin's 'wing-growing' female characters such as Madame Ratignolle are not able to fly. In their limiting role as wives and mothers, they rather use their wings to protect their children.

6.1.1.3 The Pigeon House

Representing a new sort of woman, Edna's act of leaving her husband's house, thus escaping his physical presence, is frequently interpreted as a way to achieve and maintain independence. Martin (1988: 22), however, argues that her move to the small cottage can also be read as a sign of "regression and retreat". Although her so-called 'pigeon house' gives Edna the freedom to do as she pleases, it is, in many respects, just "a smaller cage" and does not really improve her situation.

The cottage offers privacy and comfort, but Edna Pontellier continues to live like a prisoner: Inside, the small house saves her from the inquisitive looks of her environment, but in public she is still forced to behave according to society's norms. She has to hide her growing desires in order to save her and her family's face. Therefore, Edna again is not really free. Like a pigeon, "a domesticated dove" (Martin 1988: 22), she remains bound to the domestic sphere. As Foster (1986: 166) summarizes:

> [The pigeon house] speaks for the paradoxical dichotomies of female experience – here, the conflicting desires for boundless freedom and for the safety of the enclosure, the rejection of constraints co-existing with terror of complete autonomy, and the revolutionary spirit undermined by its own awareness of inevitable defeat.

6.1.2 Marriage and Creole Society

In contrast to the other characters in Chopin's *The Awakening*, Edna Pontellier is not of Creole origin. Entering the community of the Louisiana Creoles, she is confronted with a lifestyle which follows completely different religious, political

and social rules, and meets people with different norms and values. Her northern 'American' and the southern Creole culture do not seem to understand each other. One of the major problems Edna Pontellier has to face in Chopin's *The Awakening* results from such a lack of understanding.

Whereas the American is considered to have a "hard, dry, pushing, utilitarian" nature, the Creole is seen as a sentimental, "more artistic and milder type". Still "linger[ing] in the past" he leads a pleasurable life of "social gatherings, musical soirées, and convivial dining" (Rhodes 1873/2004: 17ff.). The Creole man is well-mannered, polite and respectful. The Creole woman is a beautiful, graceful coquette with "round limbs and delicate extremities" (ibid.). Warm and vivacious in character, the Creole strongly differs from his somber, hard-working 'American' neighbor. Although Edna, within six years of marriage to a Creole, has got used to the "winter and summer routine, with the weekend visits from her husband, with the servants who cook her food and tend her children" (Ruland 1987: 124), a number of social customs remain foreign to her.

Born in Presbyterian Kentucky, she was raised in a society strictly controlled by social and religious conventions. Strongly deviating from the Roman Catholic Creole culture with its apparent openness, her background of American Protestantism and the rigid moral codes of her childhood continue to influence her. Edna Pontellier therefore still feels like an outsider among the Creoles at Grand Isle:

> Mrs. Pontellier, though she had married a Creole, was not thoroughly at home in the society of the Creoles; […]. A characteristic which distinguished them and which impressed Mrs. Pontellier most forcibly was their entire absence of prudery. Their freedom of expression was at first incomprehensible to her, though she had no difficulty in reconciling it with a lofty chastity which in the Creole woman seems to be inborn and unmistakable (TA, 12).

Ziff (1987: 23) explains that the Creole woman's "freedom of expression" and "absence of prudery" mentioned by Edna is due to her "acceptance of maternity as totally adequate to the capacities of her nature" which carries with it "the complements of a fierce chastity, a frankness of speech on sexual matters, a mature ease among men, and a frank and unguilty pleasure in sensual

indulgence". Edna Pontellier, on the contrary, growing up with the rigid moral codes of Protestantism, was taught to detest "sexual desire as the root of evil" (ibid.). Bearing Edna's upbringing and despising attitude towards motherhood in mind, one could at this point pose the question whether it is even possible for Edna to experience sensual indulgence without feeling guilty.

The two differing attitudes towards sexuality are reflected already at the outset of *The Awakening* when Edna deals with "a book [which] had gone rounds of the *pension*" (TA, 12): While she is astonished and reads the book "in secret and solitude" hiding "it from view at the sound of approaching footsteps" (ibid.) as if doing something wrong, the Creole women "freely discuss [the novel] at table" (ibid.) and openly criticize it.

Also in appearance Edna Pontellier does not resemble the typical Creole woman with "round limbs" as described by Rhodes (1873/2004: 17ff.). In contrast to Madame Ratignolle, who has a "feminine and matronly figure", the "lines of [Edna's] body [are] long, clean and symmetrical […]". Almost androgynous in appearance, "a casual and indiscriminating observer, in passing, might not cast a second glance upon the figure. But with more feeling and discernment he would have recognized the noble beauty of its modeling, and the graceful severity of poise and movement, which made Edna Pontellier different from the crowd" (TA, 17).

Not only Edna's 'American' attitude toward sexuality and her looks are different, also the openly displayed flirtation of the Creoles deviates from her understanding of appropriate behavior. Owing to her Protestant background, Robert Lebrun's casual touches on the porch make her feel uncomfortable. A married woman, she considers physical contact a very personal thing reserved for her husband. Unaware of the common belief that "Creole marriage is firm enough to allow social freedom between the sexes" (Ruland 1987: 124), Robert's way of acting confuses Edna, and she is uncertain about how to interpret the situation. Adèle Ratignolle, familiar with her friend's partial ignorance of the Creole's social codes, therefore warns Robert to "let Mrs. Pontellier alone" (TA, 22). She explains: "She is not one of us; she is not like us. She might make the unfortunate

blunder of taking you seriously" (TA, 23), which Edna to a certain extent actually does. She does not see that Robert Lebrun's behavior does not mean to arouse any feelings in her. He just acts according to the rules of the Creole community.

Adèle Ratignolle knows that basically Robert did not transcend any boundaries. She notes: "If your attentions to any married women here were ever offered with any intention of being convincing, you would not be the gentleman we all know you to be, and you would be unfit to associate with the wives and daughters of the people who trust you" (TA, 23). Still, Adèle remains worried about her close friend Edna as she is well aware of the fact that

> the indissolubility of marriage is used by the Creole community as both a constraint of sexual freedom (especially for women) and also a license for ritual sexual games. These must be played according to unspoken rules, the breaking of which inevitably signals ostracism […] (Taylor 1989, cited in Koloski 2008: 167).

Edna Pontellier, only partly a member of the Creole community, is obviously unable to play according to these unspoken rules: Instead of seeing Robert's flirtation as a game, an "aristocratic amusement" (Martin 1988: 20) as the Creole women would do, she develops a serious attraction for him. Edna's romantic feelings for Robert Lebrun, as Martin (ibid.) argues, serve as her "substitute for religion".

Already in Edna Pontellier's childhood, at the age of ten, an infantile passion for the cavalry officer replaced religion. Instead of listening to the prayers "read in a spirit of gloom by [her] father", she runs away "from the Presbyterian service", and crossing "a meadow that seem[s] as big as the ocean" (TA, 19) she indulges in fantasies about her beloved one. This childhood experience appears to be an early attempt to 'swim'. Just like the sea at Grand Isle with its limitless expanse which offers welcome release from her feeling of domestic confinement, the sea of grass seems to protect Edna from the restraints imposed upon her by her father and American Protestantism. With the marriage to Léonce Pontellier, a Catholic, Edna finally manages to free herself from the rigid codes of Presbyterian Kentucky only, as Ruland (1987: 124) notes, "to suffer the loneliness of a foreigner adrift in a strange culture, a strange land".

Robert, however, does not realize that Edna's upbringing in the North makes her an outsider in the Creole community: Unlike other women of his class, Edna Pontellier is not committed to a code of chastity. Alcée Arobin, like Adèle, is fully aware of this fact. In contrast to the conservative Robert, who leaves Edna's presence temporarily and seeks employment in Mexico in order to save the face of both, Alcée is willing to break with the rules of Creole society.

As Ruland (1987: 125) concludes, Edna Pontellier's status as an outsider gives the reader the opportunity to have a look behind the façade of Creole life, and exposes "the rigid moral code that runs beneath what seems the lax behavior of the Creole men and women".

6.2 A sense of captivity in THE YELLOW WALLPAPER

6.2.1 The Rest Cure

A supporter of Dr. S. Weir Mitchell's 'rest cure', the husband of Gilman's narrator-protagonist brings his wife to a deserted, colonial mansion in order to cure her of her "temporary nervous depression" (TYW, 42). A man and doctor at the same time, he is supposed to know best and therefore she more or less willingly delegates the responsibility for her body and soul to her husband. Undertaking Dr. Mitchell's 'cure', the woman has a "schedule prescription for each hour in the day" and is not allowed to "stir without special direction" (TYW, 43). She is "absolutely forbidden to "work"" (TYW, 42) and distanced from "stimulating people" (TYW, 46).

Although she "personally" disagrees with her husband's and brother's ideas and "personally" believes "that congenial work, with excitement and change, would do [her] good" (TYW, 42), her viewpoint is not taken into consideration. Ford (1985: 311) comments that "to [John] the word "personally," coming from her, signifies that the ideas to follow can be ignored as mere opinion". Although "the narrator has her own plan for recovery including visits with friends and, most important, a return to her writing", John "contradicts these possibilities". Stuck in a room in the attic, however, the physical and mental inactivity cause the woman's health to deteriorate, rather than improve: She starts to suffer from crying spells

and fatigue. As she is not even allowed to write, which is usually a "great relief to [her] mind" (TYW, 41), the heroine of Gilman's "The Yellow Wallpaper" starts to put her focus on ordinary, everyday objects, in particular the yellow wallpaper in her room.

At first disgusted by its color and pattern, which in places resembles "a broken neck and two bulbous, [staring] eyes" (TYW, 46), the narrator-protagonist soon develops an obsessive fascination with the paper. Highly imaginative from early childhood on when she "[got] more entertainment and terror out of blank walls and plain furniture than most children could find in a toy-store" (TYW, 46), the woman gradually loses her grasp on reality. The severity of this process remains unnoticed by her husband for quite a while. Laughing off her comments about the queer "haunted house" (TYW, 41) at the outset of the story, he is aware of his wife's vivid imagination. He frequently cautions her "not to give way to fancy" and demands that she "use[s] [her] will and good sense" (TYW, 46).

A doctor, John cannot show understanding for her – what he considers to be – irrational behavior, and threatens his wife with sending her to Weir Mitchell if she does not 'pull herself together' and "pick up faster" (TYW, 47). Ironically, John utters this threat shortly after the Fourth of July celebrations, as pointed out by Horner and Zlosnik (1990: 37). While America as a nation celebrates its independence, Gilman's female protagonist as an American woman in the late nineteenth century was not guaranteed independence or any kind of freedom: "This is a society celebrating its democracy; a society founded on the 'Declaration of Independence' for *man*. It is a society which excludes women from that concept of democracy and one in which they have no vote and little power".

Alarmed by the physician's reputation, whose methods are said to be worse than her husband's, she refuses to be treated by him: "I had a friend who was in his hands once, and she says he is just like John and my brother, only more so" (TYW, 48)!

6.2.1.1 Parallels between "The Yellow Wallpaper" and *The Awakening*

Similar to "The Yellow Wallpaper", medicine in connection with patriarchal aspects also plays an important part in Chopin's *The Awakening*. Although only mentioned a few times in the second half of the novel, the character of Doctor Mandelet, the Pontellier's family physician, is of great significance. Semi-retired he bears a "reputation for wisdom rather than skill", is a patient listener to people's problems and therefore still "much sought for in matters of consultation" (TA, 72). The people in his environment put trust in his opinion, and also Léonce Pontellier decides to seek help and advice from the doctor when Edna shows first signs of resistance to marriage and motherhood. Concerned with his appearance and social standing, Léonce explains the situation:

> She's odd, she's not like herself. […] She lets the housekeeping go to the dickens. […] Her whole attitude – toward me and everybody and everything – has changed. […] She's got some sort of notion in her head concerning the eternal rights of women; and – you understand – we meet in the morning at the breakfast table (TA, 72f.).

In contrast to Gilman's combined physician and husband, John, who appears dominant and cold, Doctor Mandelet is a kind and paternal figure who tries to show understanding for Edna's behavior. He notes that "women are not all alike" (TA, 72) and even asks Mr. Pontellier if his wife's changing attitude may be due to unacceptable behavior on his side: "What have you been doing to her, Pontellier?" (TA, 73) (cf. Steffens 2007: 3).

Despite his sympathy for Edna, it cannot be ignored that the doctor is a product of his time: He remains strongly influenced by the atmosphere of late 19th-century patriarchal society and therefore considers housekeeping and child-rearing satisfying activities for women (cf. Steffens 2007: 3). A change in attitude "must [therefore] stem from external forces of corruption" (Horner/ Zlosnik 1990: 46). As a result, Doctor Mandelet asks Léonce if his wife "has been associating of late with a circle of pseudo-intellectual women – super-spiritual superior beings?" (TA, 73).

As Madame Pontellier had not been in contact with "pseudo-intellectual women" (ibid.), Doctor Mandelet's only explanation for Edna's conspicuous

behavior is based on contemporary medical and psychological findings. He diagnoses Madame Pontellier with a temporary psychic condition that "will pass happily over, especially if [he] let[s] her alone" (TA, 74):

> Woman, my dear friend, is a very peculiar and delicate organism – a sensitive and highly organized woman, such as I know Mrs. Pontellier to be, is especially peculiar. […] Most women are moody and whimsical. This is some passing whim of your wife, due to some cause or causes which you and I needn't try to fathom (ibid.).

Thus, Horner and Zlosnik (1990: 46) argue, Doctor Mandelet "reduces the need for political and social change to a minor problem of one woman's neurosis". Similar to Gilman's female heroine, Edna's 'symptoms' are not taken seriously, but attributed to a mental weakness. Her awakening desires remain therefore unnoticed, at least by her husband. According to Heilmann (2008: 91), "Léonce would have needed to be enlightened about his wife's 'passional being' in order to learn how to relate to her sexually and emotionally". As female desires, however, could not be accommodated in late Victorian society, women's sexuality was ignored or even denied.

Checking Mrs. Pontellier in person "[Doctor Mandelet] could discern in [her] no trace of that morbid condition which her husband had reported to him. She was excited and in a manner radiant". He, however, notes

> a subtle change which had transformed her from the listless woman he had known into a being who, for the moment, seemed palpitant with the forces of life. […] There was no repression in her glance or gesture. She reminded him of some beautiful, sleek animal waking up in the sun (TA, 77f.).

While observing Edna at the dinner table, Doctor Mandelet seems to realize the real nature of Edna's changed behavior. He appears to understand that her indifference towards her husband is not merely based on a "passing whim", but on awakening desires for another man. After listening to her story about a "woman who paddled away with her lover one night in a pirogue and never came back" (TA, 78), he finally sees himself reassured in his unexpressed fear that Mrs. Pontellier might have an extramarital affair, thus violating the rules of Creole society which is firmly built on the common belief in the indissolubility of marriage. Heath (1994/2004: 86) adds that in having Doctor Mandelet inwardly

acknowledge that women too are sexual beings, "Chopin anticipates the work of Freud ["an inspired psychologist", TA, 74] whose theories were just beginning to emerge".

6.2.2 Double Authority

John's role as the narrator-protagonist's husband and his profession as a physician give him double authority. Considering the medical treatment of women in the nineteenth century, John's position makes him appear "a doubly powerful antagonist" (Hedges 1992: 327) whose opinion seems unquestionable. Husband and doctor at the same time, he is supposed to know best as far as his wife is concerned. The physician's talk is "powerful and public; representing institutional authority […]" (Treichler 1984: 65) and therefore no one will doubt his view. Gilman's female protagonist is well aware of this fact. She explains: "If a physician of high standing, and one's own husband, assures friends and relatives that there is really nothing the matter with one but temporary nervous depression – a slight hysterical tendency – what is one to do?" (TYW, 41f.).

The woman's remark "what is one to do" suggests that she has resigned herself to her fate: It is his professional word against hers, and therefore no one will take her seriously. The protagonist is left alone with her sufferings as even John, who is meant to help her, is deaf to her worries and needs: "[He] does not know how much I really suffer. He knows there is no *reason* to suffer, and that satisfies him" (TYW, 44). A man of reason, who devoted his life to science, he is a rational character who "privileges […] the observable" (Treichler 1984: 65): "John is practical in the extreme. He has no patience with faith, an intense horror of superstition, and he scoffs openly at any talk of things not to be felt and seen and put down in figures" (TYW, 41). John's rational attitude becomes apparent when his wife again confronts him with her strange feelings about the house and its history:

> There was some legal trouble, I believe, something about the heirs and co-heirs; anyhow, the place has been empty for years. That spoils my ghostliness, I am afraid, but I don't care – there is something strange about the house – I can feel it. I even said so to John one moonlight evening, but he said what I felt was a *draught*, and shut the window (TYW, 42f.).

In contrast to his wife, a highly imaginative character, the doctor consistently refuses the irrational and unconscious. Therefore, "John comes to stand not only for unbelief […], but for the repression of romantic reading" as Jacobus (1986: 236) notes.

For this reason, he appears completely unsuitable to understand the female protagonist and offer the right treatment. "The Yellow Wallpaper's" heroine seems to identify this problem: "John is a physician, and *perhaps* – […] – *perhaps* that is one reason I do not get well faster" (TYW, 41). Gilman's narrator-protagonist keeps her thoughts to herself, however. From the outset of the short story until its dramatic finale, she is forced to hide her feelings: "I would not be so silly as to make [John] uncomfortable just for a whim" (TYW, 45). "It is so hard to talk to John about my case, because he is so wise, and because he loves me so" (TYW, 50).

On the one hand, the woman hides her feelings in order not to trouble her husband. On the other hand, she also knows that her complaints are useless. A powerful sense of inequality between husband and wife becomes apparent: The 'weak sex', a fragile, helpless being who indulges in daydreams and needs to be taken care of has to face a wise, untouchable doctor. One almost gets the impression that Gilman describes a father-daughter rather than a husband-wife relationship. The protagonist looks up to her husband as a father figure of authority who would not accept any protest. This feeling of oppression is reinforced through John's constant urge to patronize his wife. He calls her a "blessed little goose" (TYW, 44) or "a little girl" (TYW, 50) and advises her on what to do: "Don't go walking about like that – you'll get cold" (TYW, 50). John even "make[s] [her] lie down for an hour after each meal" (TYW, 52).

At one point the narrator-protagonist tries to convince her husband that his prescribed rest cure is not successful, but he ignores her doubts. Although the woman is obviously not gaining, John insists that her condition has improved: "[…] but you really are better, dear, whether you can see it or not. I am a doctor, dear, and I know" (TYW, 50). Reassuring him that this is not the case, he, with a big hug, simply notes: "Bless her little heart! She shall be as sick as she pleases"

(TYW, 51). John's last remark proves that he still does not believe his wife to be seriously ill. Judging her behavior, he rather sees his diagnosis confirmed as hysteria-patients were frequently thought to be "capriciously fanciful about [their] health, imagining or feigning strange diseases" (Gilbert/ Gubar 1985/1996: 969).

As his wife grows stubborn about her deteriorating health, John's former compassion for her turns into anger: "[…] he sat up straight and looked at [her] with such a stern, reproachful look that [she] could not say another word" (TYW, 51). This behavior and facial expression reflect John's previously mentioned dominant, father-like position. Gilman's female protagonist remains quiet from this point onward and tries to control herself "– before [John], at least" (TYW, 43), but her condition continues to worsen as his display of authority increases.

6.2.3 The Room in the Attic

The short story's narrator-protagonist is not only treated like a child, but even has to undergo her rest cure in a room in the attic originally intended for children. Although she does not feel comfortable in the nursery, her husband considers it the most suitable sleeping place for the couple:

> I don't like our room a bit. I wanted one downstairs that opened on the piazza and had roses all over the window, and such pretty old-fashioned chintz hangings! but John would not hear of it. He said there was only one window and not room for two beds, and no near room for him if he took another. […] So we took the nursery at the top of the house (TYW, 43).

Although described as a "big, airy room […] with windows that look all ways, and air and sunshine galore" (TYW, 43), it does not exude a cozy, romantic atmosphere. The room's features rather remind of a deserted prison-like torture chamber from which it is difficult to escape:

> It was nursery first and then playroom and gymnasium, I should judge; for the windows are barred for little children, and there are rings and things in the walls. The paint and paper look as if a boys' school had used it. It is stripped off – the paper – in great patches all around the head of my bed, about as far as I can reach, and in a great place on the other side of the room low down (TYW, 43).

> Then the floor is scratched and gouged and splintered, the plaster itself is dug out here and there, and this great heavy bed which is all we found in the room, looks as if it had been through the wars (TYW, 47).

Snyder-Rheingold (1999, online) notes that the room in the attic with its prison-like features is of great symbolic importance: It represents the female body. While the barred windows symbolize the 'imprisonment' of 19th-century women in emotional, social and intellectual terms, the nailed-down bed stands for the repression of female sexuality in patriarchal society.

The room's unwelcoming atmosphere, however, does not seem to bother John as he does not spend much time upstairs anyway. Most time of the day he is gone, while his wife is forced to remain in the room just by herself. When Gilman's narrator-protagonist begs her husband to renovate her 'personal prison', he refuses appealing to her to use her common sense: "He said that after the wall-paper was changed it would be the heavy bedstead, and then the barred windows, and then that gate at the head of the stairs, and so on" (TYW, 44).

Snyder-Rheingold (1999, online), however, suspects the man to have an ulterior motive: John does not refuse to remove the bars or the gate for his wife's own good. Primarily, she argues, he seeks to "uphold the hierarchy of the house" and keep his position of power. As John has the key which opens the gate at the head of the stairs, he is able to enter and leave as he pleases, while the woman does not have this choice. She is the object or 'case' to be examined and "observed". Her husband, on the other hand, is and wants to remain in the superior position of the "observer".

Gilman's narrator-protagonist, however, does not grasp John's intentions. Instead, she believes that her husband is probably right in not giving in to her demands. The woman does not immediately realize that her life becomes more and more limited: not only in terms of space, but also as far as her (free) will is concerned. Locked up in the room in the attic, her only consolation is the lovely view from her windows:

> Out of one window I can see the garden, those mysterious deep-shaded arbors, the riotous old-fashioned flowers, and bushes and gnarly trees. Out of another I get a lovely view of the bay and a little private wharf belonging to the estate. There is a beautiful shaded lane that runs down there from the house. I always fancy I see people walking in these numerous paths and arbors, […] (TYW, 46).

While looking at the world outside imagining people strolling through the landscape, the garden, however, also becomes a source of frustration for the story's heroine, as her imprisonment in the nursery not only means to infantilize, but also marginalizes her: She is totally excluded from any kind of human affairs. At the same time, Horner and Zlosnik (1990: 38) argue, the woman's "elevated perspective also, however, metaphorically suggests an intellectual awakening to that process of marginalization".

Although the situation for Gilman's female protagonist seems bleak, "there's one comfort":

> […] the baby is well and happy, and does not have to occupy this nursery with the horrid wallpaper. If we had not used it, that blessed child would have! What a fortunate escape! Why, I wouldn't have a child of mine, an impressionable little thing, live in such a room for worlds (TYW, 49).

6.2.4 The Wallpaper

Gilman's female narrator-protagonist is disgusted at the sight of the nursery's wallpaper:

> I never saw a worse paper in my life. One of those sprawling flamboyant patterns committing every artistic sin. It is dull enough to confuse the eye in following, pronounced enough to constantly irritate and provoke study, and when you follow the lame uncertain curves for a little distance they suddenly commit suicide – plunge off at outrages angles, destroy themselves in unheard contradictions. The color is repellant, almost revolting; a smouldering unclean yellow, […] (TYW, 43).

Soon, however, the woman develops an obsessive fascination with the paper: Out of boredom, as she is not allowed to write, "she becomes a reader and what she reads is the pattern in the wallpaper" (Horner and Zlosnik 1990: 38). She closely studies its pattern and starts treating the paper like an animate object capable of thinking and constantly observing her:

> This paper looks to me as if it *knew* what a vicious influence it had! There is a recurrent spot where the pattern lolls like a broken neck and two bulbous eyes stare at you upside down. […] Up and down and sideways they crawl, and those absurd, unblinking eyes are everywhere. […] I never saw so much expression in an inanimate thing before, […] (TYW, 46).

Tormented and fascinated at the same time, the yellow wallpaper stirs up the imagination of Gilman's heroine: The paper reveals to her "a kind of sub-pattern in a different shade, a particularly irritating one, for you can only see it in certain lights, and not clearly then" (TYW, 47). Adopting the shape of a "strange, provoking, formless sort of figure, that seems to sulk about behind that silly and conspicuous front design" (ibid.), the sub-pattern finally takes the form of a woman "stooping down and creeping" (TYW, 50). While "by daylight she is subdued, quiet" (TYW, 52), by moonlight the pattern becomes bars and she shakes them, "just as if she want[s] to get out" (TYW, 50). Gilman's narrator-protagonist believes that "it is the pattern that keeps her so still" during the day as "it is so puzzling" and keeps her "quiet by the hour" too (TYW, 52).

6.2.4.1 Pattern

As already pointed out in an early section of this thesis, as the story's key metaphor, the wallpaper allows various ways of reading it.

Bearing the bars and the creeping woman behind them in mind, the wallpaper seems to reflect the conditions of society in which Gilman's narrator-protagonist lives: Physically imprisoned in a room in the attic, the female narrator's life is dominated by the confining patriarchal structures of late 19th-century society. Her whole existence is characterized by being subservient to men, which is symbolized by the creeping movement of the woman in the wallpaper. Unable to successfully communicate with someone in power who could change her situation, such as her husband, every attempt to escape the oppressive structures of society fails. This failure to achieve freedom is also expressed in the pattern of Gilman's wallpaper: "[The woman] is all the time trying to climb through. But nobody could climb through that pattern – it strangles so; I think that is why it has so many heads" (TYW, 55). The numerous strangled off 'heads' in the pattern show that female nonconformist behavior is not tolerated by society

and worth punishing. This 'unhealthy' attitude of late Victorian society towards women's desire for autonomy is represented through the paper's "unclean yellow" (TYW, 43) color. Also Gilbert and Gubar (1984: 91) in their early study *The Madwoman in the Attic* share the opinion that there is a parallel between Gilman's female heroine and the woman imprisoned in the paper: "Eventually it becomes obvious […] that the figure creeping through and behind the wallpaper is both the narrator and the narrator's double".

In analyzing the meaning of Gilman's wallpaper in regard to female oppression, Karen Ford's approach to the story in terms of textuality and language seems relevant too. Based on Paula Treichler's idea that the pattern of the wallpaper "represents women's discourse" as defined by patriarchal 19th-century society, Ford (1985: 311) explains:

> […] The wallpaper does seem to resemble all-too-familiar assessments of women's language – first, it "sins" against established forms; it is dull, confusing, irritating, yet nevertheless provoking. […] The most crucial element […], however, is the "unheard of contradictions". […] "The Yellow Wallpaper" is replete with contradictions. The conjunction of contradiction – "but" – occurs 56 times in this short space and there are numerous instances of other words – and, so, only, besides – employed to mean "but". Every time the narrator speaks, she is interrupted and contradicted until she begins to interrupt and contradict herself.

Dealing with the oppressive structures of male discourse, Fetterley (1986/1992: 254) shares Ford's and Treichler's theory about the wallpaper's pattern noting that "in "The Yellow Wallpaper", Gilman argues that male control of textuality constitutes one of the primary causes of women's madness in a patriarchal culture. Forced to read men's texts, women are forced to become characters in those texts. […] They are forced to deny their own reality and to commit in effect a kind of psychic suicide". Woman's act of committing a kind of psychic suicide is also represented in the wallpaper's pattern: "[…] when you follow the lame uncertain curves for a little distance they suddenly commit suicide" (TYW, 43).

6.2.4.2 Smell and Color

Apart from the pattern, the disturbing smell and the yellow color of the wallpaper are essential for the analysis of Gilman's famous short story as well.

While the paper's "unclean yellow" (TYW, 43) color may symbolize late Victorian society's rotten attitude towards women's desire for autonomy, Horner and Zlosnik (1990: 39) argue that "connected with the avant-garde and the death of Victorianism, the color yellow came to suggest the daring subversion of past values". Therefore, it is possible that Gilman's "The Yellow Wallpaper" anticipated *The Yellow Book* (1894), the stories of which primarily "concentrated on woman's identity and sexuality", and which dealt with a "new breed of woman" (1990: 41): A woman who demanded "political, artistic and sexual fulfilment", but at the same time

> feared the consequences of her liberty, regardless of whether or not her husband was sympathetic. She not only had to bear and combat the prejudice, hostility, [and] ridicule of society, […] but she also had to come to terms with the prospect of disastrously upsetting the balance of her domestic life […] (ibid.).

The growing woman was therefore not only forced to cope with the pressures of a slowly changing society, but also with her own anxiety. This problematic situation again proves that the "social construction of gender can be a prison house" (ibid.). Also Gilman's female narrator-protagonist has to face the described difficulty: She is a writer who seeks artistic fulfilment and basically knows what is right for her. She still feels remorse, however, for not supporting her husband with the house and the baby, and seems to be fearful and disgusted of her sexuality. Symbolized by the yellow color of the paper, the woman's emerging sexuality after childbirth, which so far has been repressed, has negative associations for her: "It is the strangest yellow, that wall-paper! It makes me think of all the yellow things I ever saw – not beautiful ones like buttercups, but old foul, bad yellow things" (TYW, 54). As pointed out by John's sister, "the paper stain[s] everything it touche[s]" (TYW, 52) and just like its smell seems to transgress boundaries and "escape any enclosure" (Horner/ Zlosnik 1990: 42):

> It creeps all over the house. I find it hovering in the dining-room, skulking in the parlor, hiding in the hall, lying in wait for me on the stairs. It gets into my hair. Even when I go to ride, if I turn my head suddenly and surprise it – there is that smell! Such a peculiar odor, too! I have spent hours in trying to analyze it, to find what it smelled like. It is not bad – at first, and very gentle, but quite the subtlest, most enduring odor I ever met (TYW, 54).

In order to reach the smell, Gilman's narrator-protagonist even "[thinks] of burning the house" (TYW, 54). Supposing the color of the wallpaper symbolizes the sexuality of the story's heroine, the smell might, then, represent the woman's identity. Both seem to overcome the wallpaper's pattern and "lead the woman beyond the confining sense of self with which society has endowed her" (Horner/ Zlosnik 1990: 42).

6.2.4.3 Parallels between "The Yellow Wallpaper" and *The Awakening*

The color yellow is also used in Chopin's *The Awakening*: When Edna on her twenty-ninth birthday gives a dinner party, the table is described as being decorated with "a cover of pale yellow satin", "candles in massive brass candelabra under yellow silk shades" and "full, fragrant roses, yellow and red" (TA, 96).

While the yellow color in Gilman's short story comes to represent both the old-fashioned, rotten attitudes of Victorian society and female sexuality, in *The Awakening* it is primarily a sign of the occurring decadence in England and America during the 1890s and, as Horner and Zlosnik (1990: 56) note, "suggests, metaphorically, a *fin de siècle* rejection of nineteenth-century convention and respectability". As Edna's birthday dinner is, at the same time, a farewell dinner from her husband's home, a "*coup d'état*" (TA, 94) as referred to by Alcée, this suggestions seems plausible. Her act of moving to a house of her own clearly subverts the norms and values of the past.

The (pale) yellow color is not only used to describe the dining table's decoration, but is also apparent in Edna Pontellier's appearance: Her satin gown shimmers golden, while the lace shawl surrounding her shoulders has the "color of her skin" (TA, 98). Therefore, her whole person may be interpreted as posing a threat to bourgeois society, which , in fact, she partly is: "There was something in

her attitude, in her whole appearance […], which suggested the regal woman, the one who rules, who looks on, who stands alone" (TA, 98).

6.3 Résumé

Chopin's Edna Pontellier and Gilman's female narrator-protagonist are continually faced with the constricting and confining nature of late 19th-century society. The social barriers the two women have to deal with differ, however, and the protagonists' positions as captives of their environment are not equally strong developed in both writings. Whereas Edna has to struggle with the contrasting norms and values of her 'American' and her husband's Creole culture, "The Yellow Wallpaper's" heroine is forced to deal with two obstacles: John's double authority as husband and physician, and the common 19th-century belief that women, like children, need to be protected, to a certain degree even from themselves. Therefore, the sense of captivity seems more apparent in Gilman's short story. Having few rights and only little power, the woman in "The Yellow Wallpaper" can be termed a 'victim' of a male dominated society: Her sexuality has been repressed, and she lacks a sense of identity. In Edna Pontellier's case it is important to note that patriarchy alone cannot be blamed for her fate. Edna's conflict primarily results from her personality: She is a woman ahead of her time and a foreigner among the Creoles whose social rituals are partly unfamiliar to her.

7. EFFECTS OF A DOMINANT PATRIARCHAL SOCIETY

The final part of this thesis discusses whether the fate of both women – death and madness – can be interpreted as punishment for their non-conformity or personal triumph over the oppressive patriarchal structures in late 19th-century Victorian society.

7.1 Effects of a dominant patriarchal society in THE AWAKENING

7.1.1 Adultery – Ennui – Suicide

According to von Heynitz (1994: 14), Chopin's *The Awakening* is to be classified as a 'novel of adultery': Adultery not only constitutes the central theme of the text, but is also inextricably linked with the protagonist's fate.

The topic of adultery as a literary theme became particularly popular in the 19th century. When the bourgeoisie gained in size and power, their conservative values, such as respectability and marriage, too gained considerable importance. Marriage was seen as sacrosanct, in the Victorian age, however, primarily entered for economic and social reasons rather than love. With the rise of the social novel, this custom did no remain unquestioned.

Although adultery, or adulterous behavior, appears to be a natural and inevitable consequence of a loveless marriage, particularly in bourgeois society people strongly disapproved of it, and up to the present day the term 'adulterous' carries negative connotations meaning 'debauched' and 'tainted, impure'. Considering that the word 'adulterous' is closely linked with the verb 'to alter' which means 'to change', the term's complexity becomes apparent: It not only suggests that something sacrosanct, in this case marriage, is made impure, but also that existing conditions are changed, thus transgressing the boundaries of marriage. For this reason, von Heynitz (1994: 16) argues that adultery is closely linked with the topic of transgressing boundaries.

Rougemont (cf. von Heynitz 1994: 16f.) identifies the search for passion as one of the major reasons for adultery. Considering marriage and passion as incompatible, he notes that marriage is characterized by repetition and habit which inevitably dulls the feelings for the partner, provided that romantic feelings even

existed in the relationship before. The act of adultery aims at breaking the cycle of 'marital boredom'. Adulterous behavior, however, does not always result from a search for passion, but may also be due to an "individual's unrestrained desire for self-fulfillment against social constraints", as Daemmrich (1987: 8) explains.

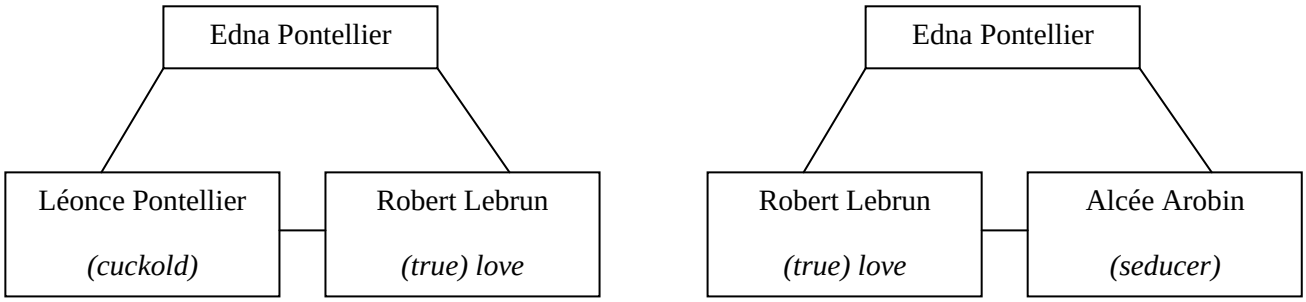
Chopin's female protagonist, Edna Pontellier, primarily seeks self-fulfillment: She is unsatisfied with the limiting role as wife and mother prescribed by society, and longs for an autonomous life which is not dictated by conventions. Her need for passion initially appears secondary: It is only a 'byproduct' of Edna's personal development, and mainly results from her relationship with Alcée Arobin. It is his kiss which awakens Madame Pontellier's passionate being. Although Chopin's protagonist does not regret Alcée's kiss, she is shocked to see how her body reacts under the man's touch: His kiss inflames her and stirs pure lust within her – an addictive experience. Having no genuine feelings for Alcée, however, Edna realizes that she is endangered to fall victim to her own physical needs which seem to control her behavior. Herein lies the ambivalent nature of passion, as von Heynitz (cf. 1994: 18) notes: It has the power to free and confine at the same time.

Edna becomes fully aware of this fact: She knows that giving in to her physical needs will result in an inability to use good judgment in making decisions, and that leading an autonomous, independent life means for her to swear off passion completely. On the other hand, Edna cannot deny herself: Inwardly she enjoyed Alcée's passionate kiss. When the realization dawns on Chopin's protagonist that, in this world, she cannot have both, freedom and passion, ennui and loneliness hit her. Her existence appears purposeless to her, which eventually leads to her tragic suicide.

According to von Heynitz (ibid.), *The Awakening*'s series of events – passion/adultery, ennui and suicide – closely resembles the so-called 'Tristan-and-Iseult-myth'. Tristan and Iseult fall in love with each other, but as Iseult is married to Tristan's uncle, King Mark, it is impossible for the two young people to really act on their feelings. Owing to the given circumstances, their love and passion cannot be fulfilled, and Iseult remains out of reach for Tristan: He cannot be with

her in this life, which is the reason why his passion is durable and permanent, even beyond death. If Tristan and Iseult had got together, their passion for each other would have died soon, and their relationship would have been characterized by repetition and habit, the previously mentioned signs of marriage.

Similar to Tristan and Iseult, Edna Pontellier's longing for love and passion too remains unfulfilled, the circumstances, however, vary. Edna is trapped in two love-triangles, or differently expressed, stuck between three men: her husband, Léonce Pontellier, the chivalrous Robert Lebrun, and Alcée Arobin, a good-looking rake:



At the outset of the novel, Chopin's protagonist is only torn between her husband and Robert who, unlike Tristan, is not part of the family, but a close friend of the Pontellier's who keeps Edna company at Grand Isle while Léonce spends most of his time working in New Orleans. Unlike Léonce Pontellier, who expects his wife to show the qualities of a 'mother-woman', Robert "offers attention, flattery, and protestations of undying devotion" (Lant 1987: 121). With his chivalry he wins Edna's heart: ""I love you," she whispered, "only you; no one but you. It was you who awoke me last summer out of a life-long, stupid dream"" (TA, 120). There is, however, no physical passion between the two. It is only towards the end of Chopin's novel that Edna wishes to consummate the relationship and tries to seduce Robert: "Now you are here we shall love each other, my Robert. We shall be everything to each other. Nothing else in the world is of any consequence" (ibid.). Her plan, however, is interrupted by the birth of Adèle Ratignolle's fourth child. When Edna returns, a farewell note written by Robert saying, "I love you. Good-by – because I love you" (TA, 124), awaits her.

According to Lant (1987: 122), "as a flirtatious, romantic intrigue, [Edna] does not threaten him, but as a sexually demanding woman, she is formidable, more than he can cope with". Foster (1986: 168), too, considers Robert "an inadequate object of Edna's desires […]" as "at a crucial time [he] lets down the woman who trusts him". As to my opinion, in leaving Edna, Robert indeed appears to be a coward, be it due to his fear of involvement or of ruining his good reputation. Basically, however, I believe that Robert's feelings for Edna are genuine, and that his act of leaving her is also meant to protect the woman he loves: He does not want to destroy her life solely for the sake of his physical pleasure.

Alcée Arobin is the exact opposite: He "offers sexuality without affection" (Lant 1987: 122). In contrast to Robert, he is "absolutely nothing to [Edna]. Yet his presence, his manners, the warmth of his glances and above all the touch of his lips upon her hand [act] like a narcotic upon her" (TA, 86), and it is only after meeting Alcée, when Edna learns "that love and sex do not necessarily coincide in the same object of desire" (Heilmann 2008: 90). This awareness gives *The Awakening*'s protagonist a guilty conscience. Interestingly, however, Edna perceives her immediate physical attraction to Alcée to be a sign of unfaithfulness to Robert than to her husband:

> She felt somewhat like a woman who in a moment of passion is betrayed into an act of infidelity, and realizes the significance of the act without being wholly awakened from its glamour. The thought was passing vaguely through her mind, "What would he think?" She did not mean her husband; she was thinking of Robert Lebrun (TA, 86).

In the end, neither Robert nor Alcée alone are able to meet Edna's needs: Similar to the traditional concepts of femininity available to Madame Pontellier, choosing one would mean to deny another essential part of herself. When Adèle begs her to "Think of the children, [.]. Oh think of the children! Remember them!" (TA, 122), Edna realizes that "she is on the brink of a series of lovers" (Ziff 1987: 22). Unlike Tristan's passion for Iseult, Edna's is not permanent: The men in her life, in particular rakes like Alcée Arobin, appear to be interchangeable: "She said over and over to herself: "To-day it is Arobin; to-morrow it will be some one else"" (TA, 126). She soon grows weary of this sort of men; her former

passion is replaced by repetition and habit. Also Robert's act of leaving does not destroy Edna: His absence deeply pains her, but Chopin's protagonist becomes aware of the fact that he, too, is replaceable and one day will be forgotten as well:

> Despondency had come upon her there in the wakeful night, and had never lifted. There was no one thing in the world that she desired. There was no human being whom she wanted near her except Robert; and she even realized that the day would come when he, too, and the thought of him would melt out of her existence, leaving her alone (TA, 127).

Edna can terminate the relationships with the men in her life, but she cannot forget about her children. Although she refuses to conform to society's ideal of the 'mother-woman', Edna remains biologically connected to her sons, and it is her obligation as their mother to protect them, and shield her children from a possible scandal. Therefore, as Ziff (1987: 23) argues, "she must accept marriage as the termination of her development and must arrest her awakening". Edna, however, refuses to do this as accepting marriage as the termination of her development would mean to sacrifice herself: she "would [.] give [her]self" (cf. TA, 53), something Edna is not willing to do. Léonce and the children are part of her life, but they cannot possess her, "body and soul" (TA, 127f.). Instead, Edna returns to Grand Isle, to the water of the Gulf, and in "swim[ming] far out, where no woman had swum before" (TA, 31), she "give[s] herself to the sea" (Ziff 1987: 23).

7.1.1.1 Victory or Defeat?

The interpretation of *The Awakening*'s dramatic finale has posed a challenge to many contemporary scholars, and opinions, whether Edna's suicide can be read as a victory or defeat vary markedly. Frequently romanticized as an act of liberation, the death of Chopin's female protagonist has also been viewed as a punishment of a sexually powerful woman who, as Foster (1986: 168) summarizes, is "defeated not only by social pressures, […], and by biological tyrannies, but also by personal conventionality".

Culley (1976, cited in Martin 1988: 14) considers Edna's drowning a triumph: In particular over her earthly limitations, such as the "confining network of social relationships in which a woman is defined as someone's daughter,

someone's wife, someone's mother, someone's mistress". Heilmann (2008: 101), too, identifies the suicide of Edna Pontellier as an assertive act which enables her to "[break] free from the patriarchal structures of marriage", and emphasizes her uncompromising vision of freedom. Edna refuses to have the morals of society imposed on her; she refuses to conform and conceal her real self. Instead, she returns to the water of the Gulf, "a natural context that knows neither boundaries nor limits" (Heilmann 2008: 89), and which, like the blue-grass meadow of her childhood, constitutes a safe haven for Edna:

> [She] heard her father's voice and her sister Margaret's. She heard the barking of an old dog that was chained to the sycamore tree. The spurs of the cavalry officer clanged as he walked across the porch. There was the hum of bees, and the musky odor of pinks filled the air (TA, 128).

Edna's last moments are filled with the memories of her childhood. Therefore, Heilmann (2008: 101) considers her suicide "a homecoming" to the "oceanic maternal womb". In taking her own life, Chopin's protagonist may appear to pay a high price for her autonomy, but her drowning remains the only way to achieve spiritual freedom.

Similar to Foster, Lant (1987: 123f.) perceives Edna Pontellier's suicide to be a defeat, in particular a defeat by biological tyrannies. As previously mentioned, Edna may refuse to conform to the role of the 'mother-woman', but she cannot renounce the role biology has assigned to her, namely to "secure mothers for the race" as "Nature", as Doctor Mandelet notes, "takes no account of […] arbitrary conditions which we create" (TA, 123). Therefore, "the only way to renounce biology is to renounce the physical self", which means Edna "must give up [her] body" in order to break the connection with her sons, and "be her own person" (Lant 1987: 123f.)

Boren (1992: 190) offers a completely different perspective on Edna Pontellier's death. In her opinion, *The Awakening*'s protagonist is a particularly sensitive person who is thrown "into fits of despondency" by an "unnamed malady", and thus kills herself. Wolff (1973, cited by Martin 1988: 14), too, attributes Edna's suicidal act to her (weakened) emotional constitution, suggesting that she experiences "an inner sense of emptiness that no adult relationship can

remedy". Also von Heynitz (cf. 1994: 130) argues that if Edna Pontellier is viewed within the context of American Victorianism, she may consider her life empty and purposeless without a man in it. This assumption shows the ambivalent nature of Chopin's heroine: On the one hand, she acts according to the ideal of the 'New Woman' who strives for freedom and independence, on the other hand, Edna "cannot envisage a new life other than in vaguely romantic terms" (Foster 1986: 168), and thus is defeated by convention.

As to my opinion, it is really difficult to interpret whether the ending of Chopin's *The Awakening* is to be seen as a victory or ultimate defeat of the novel's protagonist, as there are pros and cons on both sides. Assuming that "Edna's suicide is not a conscious choice reached through her achievement of self-awareness", as Wolkenfeld (1976: 222) views it, again sheds a completely different light on the situation which seems possible as well: Edna "was 'not thinking' as 'she walked down to the beach'" (ibid.). Together with the narrator's continual reference to Edna's growing tiredness, her death could just as well be considered a mere accident:

> She went on and on. […] Her arms and legs were growing tired. […] Exhaustion was pressing upon and overpowering her. […] Perhaps Doctor Mandelet would have understood if she had seen him – but it was too late; the shore was far behind her, and her strength was gone (TA, 127f.).

Also Edna's words "but it was too late" and Heilmann's phrasing (2008: 101), "Edna's suicide, <u>if that is what it is</u>, […]", would allow such an interpretation, but what actually goes on in the mind and heart of *The Awakening*'s female protagonist cannot be fully proven.

In consideration of various theories established by contemporary scholars, I would say that Edna spiritually triumphs over her condition of conformity and confinement. Her drowning is a necessary act in order to achieve ultimate freedom and autonomy, and appears to be the only way to escape her socially prescribed role as wife and mother. Her death, however, is necessary and cannot be considered completely voluntary. Edna does not have another choice: A woman ahead of her time, society does not live up to her expectations yet. She cannot experience womanhood, independence and romance at the same time. Therefore, I

would basically agree with Foster and conclude that Edna's death can rather be interpreted as a defeat than triumph.

7.2 Effects of a dominant patriarchal society in THE YELLOW WALLPAPER

7.2.1 Insanity

As soon as Gilman's narrator-protagonist notices the woman behind bars in the wallpaper, she becomes more and more withdrawn, and secretly wishes her husband to take another room so she can be by herself, watching the imprisoned woman in peace and quiet, and making a plan to free her without anyone noticing.

From this point onward, the protagonist's life solely revolves around the wallpaper and its hidden secrets. In her opinion, however, "life is very much more exciting [.] than it used to be" as now she has "something more to expect, to look forward to, to watch" (TYW, 53). As far as the phrases "more to expect" and "to look forward to" are concerned, one could pose the question whether "The Yellow Wallpaper's" protagonist only refers to her nighttime-activity of examining the woman in the paper, or whether she already has an idea of the story's finale.

Simultaneously, Gilman's heroine develops a slightly paranoid tendency: She is "getting a little afraid of John" who "seems very queer sometimes, and even Jennie has an inexplicable look" (TYW, 52). The woman, however, is not certain whether her own behavior is the reason for their strange way of acting, or if John and his sister too are affected by the yellow wallpaper. She "heard [her husband] ask Jennie a lot of professional questions about [her]" (TYW, 56), but has also "caught him several times looking at the paper" (TYW, 52) when he thought himself alone. "And Jennie too. [She] caught Jennie with her hand on it once," and knows "she was studying that pattern […]" (ibid.).

Gilman's narrator-protagonist is bothered by John's and Jennie's close examination of the paper as she is "determined that nobody shall find [.] out" the secret of the wallpaper's pattern "but [her]self" (ibid.). She even starts mistrusting the reader: "I have found out another funny thing, but I shan't tell it this time! It does not do to trust people too much" (TYW, 56). Eventually, the woman's

obsession and mistrust in other people culminates in her utterance that "no person touches this paper but me, – not alive!" (TYW, 57).

In order to prevent the other people in the household from observing and touching the paper, and entering as it pleases them, the short story's protagonist starts locking her room: not only to secretly imitate the creeping movement of the imprisoned woman, but also to rip off the disturbing wallpaper "little by little":

> As soon as it was moonlight and that poor thing began to crawl and shake the pattern, I got up and ran to help her. I pulled and she shook, I shook and she pulled, and before morning we had peeled off yards of that paper. A strip about as high as my head and half around the room. And then when the sun came and that awful pattern began to laugh at me, I declared I would finish it to-day! (TYW, 56).

Gilman's narrator-protagonist is on a mission which does not allow any disturbance. She throws the key to her room "down into the front path" (TYW, 57) and continues to tear off the paper. She seems uncertain about what to do: Although her original aim was to help the imprisoned woman escape the wallpaper's pattern and the nursery, she ultimately decides to tie the woman with a secretly hidden rope if she manages to get out. This uncertainty, or hesitant behavior, reflects what has been previously mentioned about late 19th-century women's longing for freedom and autonomy which was, however, accompanied by a certain degree of fear of that freedom, "since" as Horner and Zlosnik (1990: 43) argue, "such 'freedom' inevitably involves the terror of the unknown".

For Gilman's female protagonist 'freedom' as well as the 'unknown' is represented through the garden of the hereditary mansion: It is a natural space "free from cultural constructions of gender" (ibid.). In contrast to the house which is the embodiment of "what it means to be a woman […]", "the wild space of nature [.] offers no boundaries but no subjecthood either: [Gilman's narrator-protagonist] thus stands on the threshold between the two" (ibid.).

She sees many women creeping in the hedges outside, "perhaps the ghosts of former patients" of what appears to be an "abandoned private mental hospital", as Showalter (1991: 133f.) argues, but is too afraid to go outside herself. Wondering whether the women in the garden "all come out of that wall-paper as

[she] did" and whether she has "to get back behind the pattern when it comes night" (TYW, 58), it seems that Gilman's protagonist considers herself inseparable from the woman/-en in the paper. It also becomes obvious what Gilbert and Gubar (1984: 91) mean by stating that "the figure creeping through and behind the wallpaper is both the narrator and the narrator's double". Eventually she uses the hidden rope to imprison herself, instead of the figure in the paper:

> But I am securely fastened now by my well-hidden rope – you don't get *me* in the road there! […] I don't want to go outside. I won't, even if Jennie asks me to. For outside you have to creep on the ground, and everything is green instead of yellow. But here I can creep smoothly on the floor, and my shoulder just fits in the long smooch around the wall, so I cannot lose my way (TYW, 58).

The narrator's last utterance again underlines women's conflict between autonomy and conformity. Sad as it may sound, the imprisonment "The Yellow Wallpaper's" heroine faces on a daily basis provides her with a certain direction in life and a sense of stability and safety. She is well-acquainted with the conventions and limits of women's ordinary life, and instead of dealing with the 'terror of the unknown' Gilman's female protagonist seems to choose the 'safe path': She prefers to fit in and conform, thus not "los[ing] [her] way" (ibid.).

At John's return, however, the situation of both characters seems reversed: While the physician used to treat his wife like a child throughout the short story, it is now her who patronizes him. Like a mother who is annoyed about her son's behavior, she inwardly calls John "young man" (TYW, 58), and patiently explains him several times that she cannot open the door as "the key is down by the front steps, under a plaintain leaf" (ibid.). It is the first time Gilman's narrator-protagonist does not obey her husband, and actually makes him do what she wants: John gives in to his wife's request and walks downstairs to get the key. When he finally manages to enter the room, he is totally shocked finding her creeping on the floor. Unimpressed by his intruding, she continues her activity and simply utters: "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!" (TYW, 58).

Usually considered typical female behavior, John faints. Thus, "he not only inverts cultural notions concerning frailty and gender, but becomes, quite literally, a boundary" (Horner/ Zlosnik 1990: 44). Posing an obstacle "across [her] path by the wall", Gilman's female protagonist is forced to "creep over him every time" (TYW, 58) she circles the room. A gesture of dominance, this final movement too underlines the changing situation of John and his wife: Initially described as a person holding double authority, the physician in the end loses his unchallenged position of power. By crawling over her husband's body, the woman not only expresses her unwillingness to accept the boundaries that come with marriage, but also that "the threshold of Victorian marriage", represented through John's body, "must be stepped over if woman is ever to attain a more satisfactory sense of 'self'" (Horner/ Zlosnik 1990: 44).

7.2.1.1 Victory or Defeat?

Similar to Chopin's *The Awakening*, it is difficult to interpret whether the dramatic finale of Gilman's short story can be read as a triumph or defeat of her female protagonist, and since "The Yellow Wallpaper's" rediscovery opinions have varied greatly. According to Hedges (1992: 320), positions range

> along a spectrum that, at one end, sees [the protagonist's] madness as a higher form of sanity and her search for meaning in the paper as successful and liberating, to the other end, that sees her as fatally retreating to a condition of childishness, or infantilism, or animalhood, or even inanimateness. Her crawling, thus, is either a sign of rebirth or regression; and her husband's fainting proof either that she has outwitted him or that, by becoming unconscious, he's outwitted her, by refusing to listen to her.

In the 1970s, when Gilman's story was considered one of the manifestos of the Women's Movement, "The Yellow Wallpaper's" protagonist's status as a feminist heroine was unquestioned: Women refused to be viewed as victims who passively accept subordination and suffering. Numerous critical studies conducted in the following years, however, regarded the story's final scene with more skepticism. Challenging the narrator's position, they established Gilman's woman as a character damaged or even destroyed by society, rather than successfully coping with its restrictions.

While Gilbert and Gubar (1984: 91) consider John's unmasculine fainting to be only a minor triumph of Gilman's narrator-protagonist, they see the expression of the woman's real victory in her "own imaginings and creations" which are "mirages of health and freedom". The story's female protagonist, for instance, imagines the woman imprisoned in the wallpaper temporarily escaping into nature: "I have watched her sometimes away off in the open country, creeping as fast as a cloud shadow in a high wind" (TYW, 56). According to Gilbert and Gubar (ibid.), this "escape from the numb world behind the patterned walls of the text [into nature]" can be compared with "the progress of nineteenth-century literary women out of the texts defined by patriarchal poetics into the open spaces of their own authority". Therefore, both argue, "The Yellow Wallpaper's" plot depicts a development from "dis-ease into health".

Judith Fetterley (1986/1992: 255) sheds a different light on the story's finale. Concerned with the oppressive structures of male discourse, she argues that "The Yellow Wallpaper's" ending represents a "struggle for control of textuality": Men's and women's texts constitute two incompatible versions of reality which cannot coexist. As a result, also their definitions of sanity and madness vary greatly: What is defined as 'sanity' by men is considered to be 'madness' by women, and vice versa. According to Fetterley (ibid.), Gilman's narrator-protagonist, therefore, "has two choices":

> She can accept her husband's definition of reality […] [and] agree to become a character in his text; [that is], accept his definition of sanity, which is madness for her, and thus commit psychic suicide, killing herself into his text to serve his interests. Or she can refuse to read his text, refuse to become a character in it, and insist on writing her own, behavior for which John will define and treat her as mad.

Although the female protagonist's resistance to her husband's text, or sense of reality, is noticeable throughout the short story, she eventually goes "literally mad and, thus, ironically fulfills the script John has written for her". In realizing her husband's intention to force his text on her, however, Gilman's woman triumphs over him, thus "briefly" turning him into "a character in her text" (ibid.).

As to my opinion, similar to Chopin's Edna Pontellier, Gilman's narrator-protagonist too undergoes a process of 'awakening': The reader witnesses her development from a, more or less, submissive wife who does as her husband pleases, to a woman who grows increasingly stubborn to John's requests. She gets angry, tears off the wallpaper in order to free the woman behind it, and finally crawls over the physician's body – a gesture of victory over her oppressor. In uttering "I've got out at last […], [and] you can't put me back" (TYW, 58), the reader learns that "The Yellow Wallpaper's" female protagonist has eventually become aware of and questioned her situation, and she clearly does not want to return to her former unknowing self. In this sense, the story's ending turns out positively for Gilman's woman. Still, however, one has to consider Fetterley's previously mentioned concluding point, whose discourse-based theory of a 'struggle for control of textuality' seems quite plausible to me: The protagonist of Gilman's short story is mad in the end; her victory, therefore, brief indeed. Due to her 'awakened status', however, it would be unjustified to view her as a mere victim of patriarchy.

8. CONCLUSION

In conclusion, Kate Chopin's *The Awakening* and Charlotte Perkins Gilman's "The Yellow Wallpaper" provide a clear picture of the restrictive nature of late 19th-century society. Characterized by female domesticity, subservience, renunciation, and sexual passivity, both woman writers manage to depict the harmful effects of these Victorian ideals on the female life and psyche.

In presenting well-established ideas of womanhood prevailing among the middle and upper classes of late Victorian society, such as the devoted wife and mother, the eccentric artist, and the 'weak sex', Chopin and Perkins Gilman criticize patriarchy and the limited opportunities for women at the turn of the twentieth century and before. In creating the characters of Edna Pontellier, who strives for freedom and autonomy, and the intellectual female narrator-protagonist of "The Yellow Wallpaper", both authors question the universality of existing social constructs as regards women and point out the necessity for the emergence of new female role models: Women who resist conforming to their male contemporaries' ideas of femininity.

With *The Awakening*'s protagonist, Edna Pontellier, Kate Chopin has created a new representative of femininity, referred to as the 'New Woman'. Although at the outset of the novel Chopin's protagonist is still a passive wife and mother, Edna starts to develop the characteristic traits of the 'New Woman' after taking her first swim in the sea: She increasingly refuses to submit herself to the rules of the male dominated society in which she lives, and seeks control of her own destiny. Renouncing the traditional role as wife and mother, represented through the character of her close friend Adèle Ratignolle, Edna cannot identify with Mademoiselle Reisz's choice of artistry, either. Both conventional paths demand some sort of personal sacrifice from her: either self-negation as far as her personal freedom and self-fulfillment, or her emotional and physical intimacy is concerned. Edna Pontellier, however, is not willing to negate parts of her personality and therefore leaves her husband's house in order to seek autonomy as well as emotional and physical fulfillment.

Although Chopin's protagonist initially appeared to be THE embodiment of the 'New Woman', the close analysis of primary as well as secondary literature has shown that Edna can only be viewed as a precursor of this female concept, as her character still shows traits significant for the Victorian woman, in particular the omnipresence of men in her life. The surname of *The Awakening*'s protagonist, Pontellier (engl. 'bridge-maker'), too, suggests such a conclusion. The character of Edna Pontellier, therefore, rather bridges "the traditional affiliative, instrumental, feminine mode and the aggressive, autonomous ideals of the new woman" (Martin 1988: 25).

Similar to Chopin's novel, Charlotte Perkins Gilman's short story, too, portrays the development of her nameless narrator-protagonist: A passive, ailing wife – THE embodiment of the 'weak sex' – turns into a 'madwoman' in order to evade her husband's increasing demonstration of authority. Unlike Edna Pontellier, who largely manages to elude the pressures of patriarchy, the harmful effects of Victorian society on the female body and psyche become apparent at quite an early point of "The Yellow Wallpaper".

It has to be mentioned, however, that the initial situations of Chopin's and Gilman's female protagonists are different from each other. Also the social and physical barriers that establish the women's positions as captives of their environment vary and are not equally strong developed.

Although at the outset of *The Awakening* Edna Pontellier's situation is represented through a caged parrot, her major problem is not an imprisoned existence within patriarchal society, but the contrasting norms and values of her 'American' and her husband's Creole culture. Edna is, more or less, free to do as she pleases as her husband Léonce does not really interfere in his wife's business. In "The Yellow Wallpaper", however, a sense of captivity is obvious, in particular in physical terms. Undergoing Dr. S. Weir Mitchell's infamous 'rest cure', Gilman's protagonist has to follow a strict set of rules: Locked up in a nursery in the attic of a hereditary mansion, she is forced to physical and mental inactivity. Thus, "The Yellow Wallpaper's" narrator-protagonist has to deal with two obstacles: John's double authority as husband and physician, and the common

19th-century belief that women, like children, need to be protected, to a certain degree even from themselves.

Having few rights and only little power, the woman in "The Yellow Wallpaper" can be termed a 'victim' of a male dominated society: Her sexuality has been repressed, and she lacks a sense of identity. In Edna Pontellier's case it is important to note that patriarchy alone cannot be blamed for her fate. Edna's conflict primarily results from her personality: She is a woman ahead of her time and a foreigner among the Creoles whose social rituals are partly unfamiliar to her. Not believing in the indissolubility of marriage, Edna gets trapped in two love-triangles, torn between three men: her husband, Robert Lebrun, and Alcée Arobin.

Edna's non-conformist behavior, however, is only partly responsible for her eventual death. Chopin's protagonist is not punished by patriarchal society for renouncing her role as wife and mother: She is neither excluded from society, nor openly shunned by her environment for her inappropriate behavior. Edna's death rather results from her own despondency, her uncompromising vision of freedom, and her personal conventionality.

In contrast to Edna Pontellier's fate, the deteriorated mental status of "The Yellow Wallpaper's" protagonist, who "dwells in the middle of Patriarchy" (Ford 1985: 309), can solely be attributed to the oppressive structures of late Victorian society. Undergoing a process of 'spiritual awakening', Gilman's woman becomes aware of her husband's intention to force his version of reality on her. Thus, she triumphs over her condition of conformity and confinement. Her victory, similar to Edna Pontellier's, is brief, however: Whereas *The Awakening*'s protagonist gives herself to the sea, Gilman's nameless woman ends up completely mad as a result of uncompromisingly pursuing her 'female' idea of reality.

With the awakening of their female protagonists, in either personal, sexual, or spiritual terms, Kate Chopin as well as Charlotte Perkins Gilman not only criticize outdated late-Victorian patriarchy, but also metaphorically portray the awakening and ongoing development in American society towards the end of the

nineteenth century and the early 1900s, in particular the slowly changing gender roles, and a new emerging sense of identity.

9. ZUSAMMENFASSUNG

> All history attests that man has subjected woman to his will, used her as a means to promote his selfish gratification, to minister to his sensual pleasures, to be instrumental in promoting his comfort; but never has he desired to elevate her to that rank she was created to fill. He has done all he could to debase and enslave her mind; […].
>
> I ask no favors for my sex, I surrender not our claim to equality. All I ask of our brethren is that they will take their feet off from our necks, and permit us to stand upright on the ground which God has designed us to occupy.[3]

Bereits im Jahre 1837 hat Sarah Grimké, Anhängerin der Sklavenbefreiung sowie Pionierin der Frauenrechtsbewegung, ihren Unmut über die Situation der Frau in einer von Männern dominierten Gesellschaft verlauten lassen, und kritisierte was Kate Chopin und Charlotte Perkins Gilman später in *The Awakening* (1899) und "The Yellow Wallpaper" (1892) problematisierten: Die Weigerung der Gesellschaft Frauen als gleichgestellt zu betrachten, und es ihnen zu gestatten, sich über den Lebensbereich von Heirat und Mutterschaft hinweg zu entfalten.

Ziel der vorliegenden Arbeit ist es, die schädlichen Auswirkungen einer von Männern dominierten Gesellschaft auf das Leben und die Seele des weiblichen Geschlechts aufzuzeigen.

Einführend wird der sozialgeschichtliche Hintergrund beider Texte erläutert, indem zunächst ein Überblick über das Leben und Schaffen von Kate Chopin und Charlotte Perkins Gilman gegeben wird. Anschließend folgt eine kurze Abhandlung über den aktuellen Forschungsstand sowie besondere

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[3] aus: *Letters on the Equality of the Sexes* (vgl. Grimké 1988: 35f.)

> Die Geschichte bezeugt, dass der Mann die Frau seinem Willen unterworfen hat, sie benutzte, um seine selbstsüchtige Erfüllung voranzutreiben, um ihm körperliche Befriedigung zu verschaffen, um seinen Komfort zu steigern; nie jedoch beabsichtigte er, sie in einen ihm ebenbürtigen Rang zu erheben. Er tat alles ihm Mögliche, um ihren Geist zu erniedrigen und zu unterjochen; […].
>
> Ich erbitte keine Gefälligkeiten für mein Geschlecht, ich trete unseren Anspruch auf Gleichheit nicht ab. Alles, was ich von unseren Brüdern verlange ist, dass sie ihre Füße von unserem Nacken nehmen, und uns erlauben, aufrecht auf dem Boden zu stehen, den Gott auch für uns geschaffen hat.

Forschungsschwerpunkte zu *The Awakening* und “The Yellow Wallpaper”. Danach werden Schlüsselereignisse sowie Werte und Normen des Amerikanischen Viktorianismus besprochen, mit besonderem Augenmerk auf die Situation der Frau in dieser Ära.

Der zweite Teil dieser Arbeit enthält die Analyse beider Texte, die sich vorwiegend auf die folgenden vier Forschungsfragen stützt: Welche Frauenkonzepte/ -ideale werden in Chopins Roman und Gilmans Kurzgeschichte dargestellt? Welche sozialen und physischen Hürden machen Edna Pontellier und Gilmans namenlose Protagonistin zu Gefangenen ihrer eigenen Gesellschaft? Wie zeigen sich diese Hürden in den Werken beider Schriftstellerinnen? Ist das Schicksal beider Frauen – Tod und Wahnsinn – als Strafe für ihre Nonkonformität gegenüber bestehender Normen, oder als persönlicher Triumph über die patriarchalischen Gesellschaftstrukturen des späten 19. Jahrhunderts zu sehen?

Kate Chopins Roman *The Awakening* und Charlotte Perkins Gilmans Kurzgeschichte “The Yellow Wallpaper” verschaffen dem Leser einen klaren Eindruck über die restriktive Natur der Gesellschaft im späten 19. Jahrhundert. Geprägt von der Häuslichkeit und Unterwürfigkeit, dem Verzicht sowie der sexuellen Passivität der Frau, gelingt es beiden Schriftstellerinnen, die schädlichen Auswirkungen dieser viktorianischen Ideale auf das Leben und die Seele des weiblichen Geschlechts aufzuzeigen.

Indem Chopin und Gilman fest etablierte Weiblichkeitskonzepte der Mittel- und Oberschicht der spätviktorianischen Gesellschaft präsentieren, wie beispielsweise die aufopfernde Ehefrau und Mutter, die exzentrische Künstlerin und das schwache Geschlecht, kritisieren sie patriarchalische Gesellschaftsformen und Denkstrukturen sowie die begrenzten Entfaltungsmöglichkeiten für Frauen gegen Ende des 19. Jahrhunderts und davor. Mit der Erschaffung von Charakteren wie der nach Freiheit und Unabhängigkeit strebenden Edna Pontellier und der intellektuellen Protagonistin von “The Yellow Wallpaper” hinterfragen beide Autorinnen die Allgemeingültigkeit existierender sozialer Konstruktionen von Weiblichkeit und machen die Notwendigkeit neuer weiblicher Vorbilder deutlich:

Frauen, die sich den Weiblichkeitsvorstellungen ihrer männlichen Zeitgenossen widersetzen.

Mit Edna Pontellier, der Protagonistin von *The Awakening*, ist Kate Chopin die Erschaffung solch eines neuen Frauentypus, der in der Literatur als die Neue Frau (engl. 'New Woman') bezeichnet wird, gelungen. Ist Edna zu Beginn des Romans noch eine passive Ehefrau und Mutter, entwickelt sie nach ihrer ersten Schwimmerfahrung in der Bucht von Grand Isle, die charakteristischen Züge der Neuen Frau: Sie weigert sich zunehmend sich den Regeln einer von Männern dominierten Gesellschaft zu unterwerfen, und will ihr Schicksal selbst in die Hand nehmen. Edna distanziert sich von der traditionellen Rolle als Ehefrau und Mutter, kann sich jedoch auch nicht mit Mademoiselle Reiszs Lebensstil, der sich ausschließlich der Kunst widmet, identifizieren. Beide konventionellen Wege verlangen Edna Pontellier ein persönliches Opfer ab: Als Ehefrau und Mutter bleiben ihr Freiheit und Selbstverwirklichung verwehrt, als Künstlerin die Geborgenheit einer Familie sowie emotionale und körperliche Intimität. Sich für eine der beiden Alternativen zu entscheiden, würde für Edna bedeuten, Teile ihrer Persönlichkeit zu verleugnen, wozu sie allerdings nicht bereit ist. Aus diesem Grund lässt sie Ehemann und Kinder zurück, um sowohl nach Unabhängigkeit als auch nach emotionaler und körperlicher Erfüllung zu streben.

Obwohl Chopins Protagonistin zunächst in allen Einzelheiten dem Typus der Neuen Frau zu entsprechen schien, zeigte die genaue Durchsicht der Primär- und Sekundärliteratur, dass Edna bloß als ein Vorläufer dieses Frauenkonzepts betrachtet werden kann, da ihre Persönlichkeit noch wesentliche Züge der Viktorianischen Frau aufweist. In diesem Zusammenhang kann insbesondere die Allgegenwärtigkeit von Männern in ihrem Leben genannt werden. Auch der Nachname der Protagonistin, Pontellier (dt. 'Brückenmacher'), legt eine solche Schlussfolgerung nahe. Edna Pontellier ist somit als Charakter zu betrachten, der eine Brücke zwischen einer alten und einer neuen Generation von Frauen schlägt.

Ähnlich Chopins Roman, portraitiert auch die Kurzgeschichte von Charlotte Perkins Gilman die Entwicklung ihrer namenlosen Protagonistin: Eine passive, kränkelnde Ehefrau – DIE Verkörperung des schwachen Geschlechts – wird zu

einer Wahnsinnigen (engl. ‘madwoman’), um den zunehmenden Autoritätsdemonstrationen ihres Ehemannes zu entgehen. Ungleich Edna Pontellier, der es zunächst gelingt, sich dem patriarchalischen Druck größtenteils zu entziehen, zeigen sich die schädlichen Auswirkungen der Viktorianischen Gesellschaft auf den Körper und die Seele der Frau in “The Yellow Wallpaper” recht früh.

An dieser Stelle muss jedoch angemerkt werden, dass sich die Ausgangssituationen von Chopins und Gilmans Protagonistin unterscheiden. Auch die sozialen und physischen Hürden die beide Frauen zu überwinden haben, unterscheiden sich.

Obwohl zu Beginn des Romans Ednas Situation anhand eines im Käfig sitzenden Papageis dargestellt wird, liegt ihr Hauptproblem nicht in ihrem Dasein als Frau in einer patriarchalischen Gesellschaft, sondern in den sich unterscheidenden Normen und Werten ihrer eigenen amerikanischen und der kreolischen Kultur ihres Ehemannes. Edna steht es im Großen und Ganzen frei, zu tun was sie möchte, da sich ihr Ehemann Léonce nicht in die Angelegenheiten seiner Frau einmischt. In “The Yellow Wallpaper” hingegen ist ein Gefühl von Gefangenschaft und Begrenzung allgegenwärtig, insbesondere in körperlicher Hinsicht. Gilmans Protagonistin unterzieht sich Dr. S. Weir Mitchells berühmt-berüchtigter ‘Liegekur’ (engl. ‘rest cure’) und ist daher gezwungen, sich an ein strenges Regelwerk zu halten. Eingesperrt in einem heruntergekommenen Kinderzimmer eines Herrenhauses, ist sie zu körperlicher und geistiger Untätigkeit verdammt. Sie hat somit mit mehreren gesellschaftlichen Hürden gleichzeitig zu kämpfen: Einerseits mit Johns doppelter Autorität als Ehemann und Arzt, andererseits mit dem weitverbreiteten Glauben, dass Frauen, wie Kinder, nicht nur vor anderen, sondern auch vor sich selbst beschützt werden müssen.

Kaum Rechte und lediglich wenig Macht besitzend, kann die Frau in Gilmans “The Yellow Wallpaper” als ein Opfer einer von Männern dominierten Gesellschaft gesehen werden. In Edna Pontelliers Fall ist die Schuld an ihrem Schicksal nicht alleinig im Patriarchat zu suchen. Ednas problematische Situation

ist hauptsächlich auf ihre Persönlichkeit zurückzuführen: Sie ist eine Frau, die ihrer Zeit voraus ist, und eine Fremde unter den Kreolen, deren soziale Rituale ihr teilweise unbekannt sind. So glaubt Chopins Protagonistin nicht an die Unauflösbarkeit der Ehe und stürzt sich blauäugig und rücksichtslos in zwei Dreiecksbeziehungen, die sie vor die Wahl zwischen drei Männer stellt: Ihren Ehemann, Robert Lebrun, und Alcée Arobin.

Ednas nonkonformistisches Verhalten ist jedoch nur teilweise für ihren späteren Tod verantwortlich. Die Gesellschaft, in der sie lebt, bestraft sie nicht direkt für ihr Abschwören von der Rolle als Ehefrau und Mutter. Sie wird aufgrund ihres unpassenden Verhaltens auch nicht offen geächtet oder von ihrem Umfeld ausgeschlossen. Ihr Tod gründet sich eher auf ihrer eigenen Niedergeschlagenheit und inneren Leere, ihrer kompromisslosen Vision von Freiheit und ihrer persönlichen Konventionalität.

Im Gegensatz zu Edna Pontelliers Schicksal, ist der schlechte mentale Zustand von Gilmans weiblicher Hauptperson alleinig den unterdrückenden Strukturen der Viktorianischen Gesellschaft zuzuschreiben. Ebenso eine Art Prozess geistigen „Erwachens“ durchlebend, durchschaut sie das Vorhaben ihres Ehemannes, ihr seine Form der Realität aufzuzwingen. In diesem Zusammenhang mag sie einen Sieg über ihre begrenzte physische Lage davontragen. Ihr Siegesmoment ist, ähnlich dem von Edna in *The Awakening*, jedoch nur von kurzer Dauer: Während Edna Pontellier ihrem Tod entgegenschwimmt, endet die namenlose Frau in Gilmans Kurzgeschichte als Wahnsinnige, da sie kompromisslos ihre ‘weibliche’ Vorstellung von Realität verfolgt.

Mit dem Erwachen ihrer Hauptdarstellerinnen in persönlicher, sexueller oder spiritueller Hinsicht, kritisieren Kate Chopin und Charlotte Perkins Gilman nicht nur die überholten vorherrschenden patriarchalischen Denkstrukturen im späten 19. Jahrhundert, sondern portraitieren auch das Erwachen und die Entwicklung der Amerikanischen Gesellschaft zum Ende des 19. sowie in den frühen Jahren des 20. Jahrhunderts, insbesondere eine langsame Veränderung der Geschlechterrollen und ein neu aufkeimendes Identitätsbewusstsein.

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