

**The Awakening of Female Consciousness in Kate Chopin's *The Story of an Hour* (1894)
and Charlotte Perkins Gilman's *The Yellow Wallpaper* (1892)**

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Abstract:

This paper aims to analyze the two short stories *The Story of an Hour* (1894) by Kate Chopin and *The Yellow Wallpaper* (1892) by Charlotte Perkins Gilman in an attempt to unfold the journey that leads the female characters to awaken their consciousness and to stand against the dominating male figures in their lives. In both short stories, the central characters Louise Mallard and Jane, undergo an essential journey of self-realization, which leads them to finally freeing themselves from patriarchal authority and oppression. Moreover, the paper stresses the impact of the authors as females on their characters' development throughout that journey. Following the analytical approach within the feminist theory, the article is influenced by two major feminist critiques; Virginia Woolf and Simone De Beauvoir, who believed that women should incorporate their voices into their writings to depict more realistic female characters. Finally, both characters rejected being subordinate and oppressed and formed a reaction against it. Moreover, both authors succeeded in portraying the true characteristics of a female character; they were able to voice their own opinions and represent their true feelings.

Keywords: Charlotte Perkins Gilman, female consciousness, feminism, feminist literature, Kate Chopin, short story

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Introduction

In the feminist essay written by Woolf, (1929) a hypothetical female writer stands against male criticism and pursue writing as a profession, and states this powerful statement “Lock up your libraries if you like; but there is no gate, no lock, no bolt that you can set upon the freedom of my mind” (p.76). Despite all the physical and psychological oppression and dominance imposed on women, their minds are their own and are eventually liberated. The free thoughts of this hypothetical character resemble what both female characters in the short stories *The Story of an Hour* (1981) by Kate Chopin, and *The Yellow Wallpaper* (1892) by Charlotte Perkins Gilman finally end with; A free soul.

In both short stories, the central characters Louise Mallard and Jane, undergo an essential journey of self-realization, which leads them to finally freeing themselves from patriarchal authority and oppression. Thus, this paper aims to analyze the two short stories in an attempt to show the journey that the female characters go through in order to free themselves from the haunting male figures in their lives and to shed light on the impact of the authors as females on their characters' development throughout that journey.

Literature Review

The patriarchal ideology controlled the literary canon until the late 18th century. Male writers exploited women both in life and in literature. They were depicted as inferior, and their characters were marginalized and silenced. Gubar (1981) addresses this unjust depiction of female characters in her essay “*The Blank Page*” and *the Issues of Female Creativity*. She discusses the re-creation of the female character in the male's image as objects; “But if the creator is a man, the creation itself is the female, who, like Pygmalion's ivory girl, has no name or identity or voice of her own” (p. 244). Gubar believes that the position of female characters within a culture is not only as an object but as an art object, she compares her to an engraving made of ivory, a replica made of mud, an icon or doll, she could be anything but the sculptor itself (p. 244).

A few male writers might deviate from the stereotypical depiction of the female character. Claridge and Langland, (1990) believe that their intentions are not necessarily sympathetic towards it, on the contrary, they primarily employ feminism as a means to serve their ideology, agenda, and to further assert their masculinity. They state:

Although many male writers are interested in a space or possibility for expression coded as “feminine,” they are not necessarily interested in particular women and their plights or even the general plight of the generic “woman.” A male writer may simply need the space of what he or his culture terms the feminine in which to express himself more fully because he experiences the patriarchal construction of his masculinity as a constriction. He may, that is, appropriate the feminine to enlarge himself, a process not incompatible with contempt for actual women. (p. 3-4)

Consequently, female writers sought against the patriarchal literary canon that, as indicated above, portrayed a wrongful image of the female character and thus failed to deliver its actual

characteristics. Feminist theorists Gilbert and Gubar, (2004) encouraged and called upon women writers to contribute to the literary canon to negate the stereotypical image of the female character. They add:

A life of feminine submission, of 'contemplative purity,' is a life of silence, a life that has no pen and no story, while a life of female rebellion, of 'significant action,' is a life that must be silenced, a life whose monstrous pen tells a terrible story (p. 36).

Similarly, Woolf (1929) encourages writing as a profession for women, and discusses the issue of men who wrote about women to sustain their superiority, and promote their false ideology:

Have you any notion of how many books are written about women in the course of one year? Have you any notion how many are written by men? Are you aware that you are, perhaps, the most discussed animal in the universe? (p. 23).

Additionally, male writers fail to capture the complexity of female nature. Gardner (1981) believes the reason behind it is that women's experiences are different from those of men (p. 348). Berkove (2000) may serve as a prime example of a male writer's point of view that fails to understand the depth behind an oppressed female character. He believes that there is no evidence that Mrs. Mallard underwent any suppression (p. 153). He also adds that the role Mrs. Mallard portrays is unreliable; therefore, her statements are misleading and contradicted (p. 153).

Opposed to that, female writers prove successful in capturing the essence of the female character. Gardner, (1981) adds: "The other main explanation of female difference posits a "female consciousness" that produces styles and structures innately different from those of the "masculine mind" (p. 348). She further adds that the heroines are an extension of the author's identity and a representation of her ideals (p. 357).

Moreover, Ghandeharion and Mazari (2016) take on the idea of Feminine writing "Écriture féminine," a term coined by the French theorist Hélène Cixousto, in an attempt to emphasize the importance of writing for women to escape the patriarchal mindset.

Seeing that this paper is within the Feminist theory, literature on this matter has been reviewed. However, to my knowledge, none of them address the awakening of the female consciousness in both stories. Nor do they address the impact of women authors on their female characters. Therefore, this paper intends to address this gap by bringing these two works in comparison.

Methodology

Considering that both writers were the forerunners in American feminist literature, this paper follows the analytical approach within the feminist framework. Influenced by feminist theorists Virginia Woolf and Simone de Beauvoir.

Reimer (1996) defines female consciousness as "women's recognition and acceptance of the culturally defined gender role they are expected to fulfill" (p. 79). It differs from the Feminist consciousness in the sense that the latter refers to "the motive force behind the social and political liberation movement women have formed in reaction against ... a status of subordination and an experience of oppression" (p. 79). Then it can be established that the Female consciousness was a trigger for both characters to start their journey of realization toward the awakening of their Feminist consciousness.

Additionally, Woolf (1929) discusses the status of female writers within the male-controlled society. She situates the profession of writing atop the ladder of jobs that help women to gain the upper hand in their relations.

Similarly, de Beauvoir (1953) believes that societies are patriarchal, and men treat women as subordinates in those societies. She declares that:

"one is not born, but rather becomes a woman. No biological, psychological, or economic fate determines the figure that the human female presents in society; it is civilization as a whole that produces this creature, intermediate between male and eunuch, which is described as feminine" (p. 267).

De Beauvoir equally believes that working is essential for women if they are to break free from the norms imposed on them by the patriarchal society. She adds that "It is through work that woman has been able, to a large extent, to close the gap separating her from the male; work alone can guarantee her concrete freedom" (p. 813).

Analysis

It is important to note that the personal incidents that occurred to the authors influence both stories; hence, it is valid to consider both as semi-autobiographical stories. It is also crucial to understand the effect of a female author on characterizing her female character, similarly to what Gardner (1981) believes, those characters are an extension of the authors' identity (p. 357), making them reliable and trustworthy.

In the case of Chopin (1894), her story resembles that of her mother's, Eliza Faris. A young French woman who marries Thomas O'Flaherty, a man the age of her father, to secure her family financially. As Toth, (1999) states "The Story of an Hour" can be read as the story of Eliza O'Flaherty's marriage, the submission of a young woman to someone else's will" (p. 48). Thomas dies in a train crash, resembling the train crash that kills Mr. Mallard, and leaves her a widow at the age of twenty-seven. Toth adds that the death of Chopin's father helped Kate from growing up in a typical patriarchal household in the nineteenth century "in which a powerful husband ruled the roost" (p. 50).

In Chopin's *story*, Mrs. Mallard's journey towards the awakening of her consciousness starts from the moment she learns about her husband's death. Chopin characterizes Mrs. Mallard

as a woman who isn't physically oppressed, but psychologically. Despite Mrs. Mallard's young age, she has heart troubles; besides that, Chopin describes her facial features as having a fair, calm face with lines that speak of strength and will (p.2). All these physical and psychological manifestations serve as proof of oppression, which negates the above-stated argument by Berkove (2000) that there is no clear evidence of Mrs. Mallard's abuse (p.153). Mrs. Mallard receives the news in a way anyone would expect a typical woman would, "She wept at once, with sudden, wild abandonment, in her sister's arms" (Chopin, 1894, p.1). However, Mrs. Mallard goes through a moment of realization and asks to be alone in her room, as if she is rejecting the society's stereotype of grieving widows. Woolf (1929) stresses the importance of personal space for women, a place only for them to liberate from societies constraints, Woolf adds "for it is a fact, that there is no arm to cling to, but that we go alone and that our relation is to the world of reality and not only to the world of men and women" (p. 95). When she is alone in her room, Mrs. Mallard looks out the window and notices the small things outside; the smell of rain, tops of the trees, the twittering of birds. Amid her rumination, Mrs. Mallard starts to feel her exhaustion being washed away, and she physically feels her freedom being handed to her from the sky "But she felt it, creeping out of the sky, reaching toward her through the sounds, the scents, the color that filled the air" (Chopin, 1894, p.2). Mrs. Mallard then realizes her current state as a liberated woman. At first, the feeling is strange and frightening for a woman whose life was overpowered by her husband. However, she is finally relieved that she is never to be dominated by her husband and declares that she is "free! Body and soul free!" (p.3). Her freedom is to be able to live for and by herself, thus not existing as a silenced, marginalized wife.

To the family of Mrs. Mallard, her illness is a weakness to her. When she dies from the shock that her husband, her oppressor, is alive, the only assumption that comes to the male doctor's mind is that she died from an immense joy her heart could not endure. Sadly, this ending is what Chopin had to write to publish her story because, in a society conquered by unjust patriarchal ordeals, it is unacceptable for a woman to be in the joy of her husband's death. Toth (1999) adds:

"Kate Chopin had to disguise reality. She had to have her heroine die. A story in which an unhappy wife is suddenly widowed, becomes rich, and lives happily ever after. Eliza O'Flaherty's story would have been much too radical, far too threatening, in the 1890s" (p. 50).

Similarly to Chopin, Gilman's story is considered to be a reflection of her own experience. Gilman (2011) discusses the case of a male physician who protests her story, even though it is based on Gilman's personal experience with depression. The "rest cure" prescribed by the doctor, besides restricting work time to two hours to be well, proved its failure as an effective cure, as Gilman states that she followed the directions for three months and she was on the verge of madness (p. 265). She then disregards the physician's advice and starts working and gains her health again.

In her story *The Yellow Wallpaper*, Gilman tells a tale of a depressed woman who slowly descends to her destructive fate. Jane, who is controlled by her husband, John, who happens to be her physician. John believes his wife is ill and in need of a rest cure, depriving her of her profession

as a writer and disregarding what she thinks she has: a postpartum depression. John fluctuates between the husband/doctor characters, even if neither is supportive of his wife's choices. In addition to being depressed, Jane is neglected, deprived of working and in constant fear of writing openly. Even as an ill woman, Jane defies her husband's rules and writes when she is unobserved. Nonetheless, she becomes unable to keep herself sane, and it starts to exhaust her, she says "I did write for a while in spite of them; but it does exhaust me a good deal – having to be sly about it" (2009, p. 5).

Jane starts her journey of self-realization by walking into the room that she was intended to rest in for several months. She notices the wallpaper and describes it as the worst paper she saw in her life (p. 8). This wallpaper is what triggers her unconsciousness, and as time goes by, Jane finally sees her reflection through the mysterious figure inside the paper. At first, the paper's smell, appearance, and color repel her. However, she starts seeing patterns across the wallpaper, that is when she becomes determined to follow the pattern to a conclusion. Jane's determination resembles her journey; at first, she is not aware that John is imprisoning her, and as time passes she becomes more determined about her fate, Jane writes about the wallpaper saying: "There are things in that paper that nobody knows but me, or ever will. Behind that outside pattern the dim shapes get clearer every day" (p. 21). This figure that Jane starts to recognize turns out to be a trapped woman: "I didn't realize that for a long time what the thing was that showed behind, that dim sub-pattern, but now I am quite sure it is a woman" (p. 26). With time, she realizes that the woman trapped behind the paper is the real Jane. This woman only appears when no one is around, and precisely appears when John is either asleep or when he is out of the house, this is an indication that Jane is not able to act freely around her dominating husband, she is trapped and imprisoned. It was time for Jane to start liberating the woman behind the paper, she is determined, and she changes her mind about leaving the house, she has a purpose now and writes about it saying "Life is very much more exciting now than it used to be" (p. 27). Finally, she frees the woman by ripping off the paper: "I've got out at last, in spite of you and Jane, And I've pulled most of the paper, so you can't put me back!" (p. 39). According to her husband, Jane is taken over by madness, but to her, she is finally liberated from under his oppression.

Conclusion

It can be said that both authors portrayed a realistic journey for their characters, both Mrs. Mallard and Jane had their moment of liberation, but these moments either ended by death or by madness. These characters' lives were deeply affected by the dominance and oppression of their husbands, and their entrapment and suffering are strictly connected to them. Both characters rejected being subordinate and oppressed and formed a reaction against it. Moreover, both authors used their profession to write about women's suffering within the patriarchal society and successfully negated the patriarchal norms.

Additionally, they succeeded in portraying the authentic characteristics of a female character; they were able to voice their own opinions and represent their true feelings. In contrast to male authors who as Gubar (1981) stated, treated female characters as Pygmalion, a status with that "has no name or identity or voice of her own" (p. 244). Gilman declares that the reason behind

writing the story was not to drive people mad, as to what the physicians claimed she did, but to save people from going insane, which she eventually achieved. Gilman (2011) states that her article had an immense impact on a family who assisted their daughter back to recovery and normal activity (p. 265).

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