Edna Pontellier From Kate Chopin’s The Awakening Versus Daisy Miller From Henry James’ Daisy Miller

Juxtapose the character of Edna Pontellier from Kate Chopin’s The Awakening to the character Daisy Miller from Henry James’ work “Daisy Miller: A Study”.

Edna Pontellier and Daisy Miller, two women of the Victorian era that wish to live their lives on their own terms not restricted by the societal norms they find themselves expected to follow. Edna is expected to follow the “Southern” way of life while Daisy is pressured to follow the traditional “European” young woman’s role. These two women defy the social conventions, follow their own paths and in the end find release in their deaths.

The social convention that Edna had the most trouble with was that of the mother-woman role defined as “women who idolized their children, worshipped their husbands, and esteemed it a holy privilege to efface themselves as individuals and grow wings as ministering angels”. (Chopin 554) Edna was not able to relinquish herself to fit into this idyllic mold. Daisy Miller also had difficulty conforming herself into the preconceived picture of a proper young lady of her period as evidenced by her statement “I have always had a great deal of gentlemen’s society”. (James 416) This is quite contrary to the behavior of a proper “European” young lady.

Edna and Daisy both decide to travel a path that is not “normal” to their societies. Daisy and her fondness for a great deal of gentlemen’s society; gathers up “half-a-dozen of the regular Roman fortune-hunters” and travels about to people’s houses with them. (James 429) No self-respecting European young lady would behave in such a manner. Edna’s path leads her to retain a “little four-room house” (Chopin 610) and move out of the family home to gain her independence. Abandoning her husband and children is a path that was not generally accepted in her society.

Both of these women escape the condemnation of their respective societies in the release of their lives. Daisy succumbs to a fever that she contracts due to her refusal to conform to conventional wisdom and avoid the night air of the Colosseum and the Roman Fever.(James 448) This was as self-inflicted a death as any blatant suicide. Edna obtained her release through a more deliberate action of drowning herself in the ocean. (Chopin 639)

These two young women seem to be living out Hamlet’s soliloquy of whether it is nobler to accept their perceived “outrageous” fortune or to oppose it. They each chose to oppose the conventions of their time and seek their own fulfillment. Neither accepted the role the society they were in; Edna did not become “Southern mother-woman” and Daisy did not become a “European young lady”. Each of their untimely deaths gave them their final release from their struggle.

Works Cited:

1. Levine, R. (2017). The Norton anthology of American literature. 9th ed. New York: W.W. Norton.