Roles Of Women In The Awakening And The Yellow Wallpaper

On the first day of class, many teachers begin class by asking their students: “If you could have one superpower, what would it be?” Some children will respond that they would want to soar in the skies, others might proudly state that invisibility would be the most useful, but one student almost always responds: “time travel.” Science fiction novels have entrenched into our minds that within a few centuries, it will be possible to go back and change history - just imagine if we could interact with people from an entirely different time period! Yet, it could be possible that time travelers have already walked on our planet. The authors of The Awakening and The Yellow Wallpaper, Kate Chopin and Charlotte Gilman, introduce non-conventional concepts on the roles of women that are seemingly ahead of their time. During the late 19th century, women were an afterthought in their community. While men went to work every day, women were expected to abandon their aspirations for their children and husbands. Chopin and Gilman, making arguments that would soon become prevalent, dismiss the notion that women solely owed allegiance to their husbands. Ultimately, The Awakening and The Yellow Wallpaper stress that women in the late 19th century were forced to assume traditional roles in society, but show that some women simply could not meet these standards. Through the characters of Edna and the Narrator, the two authors argue that women content with their place would sacrifice their independence, while those venturing out from their homes walked a path of insanity, instability, and even death.

The Awakening and The Yellow Wallpaper were set during a period in which women were treated as the property of their husbands. In Louisiana, the setting of The Awakening, women “were the legal property of their husbands” and, following marriage, all the wife’s wealth accumulation would fall under their partner’s ownership as well. The wife was “bound to live with her husband, and follow him wherever he chose to reside” (Contexts of the Awakening). Under the state legislature, women had rights comparable to those who were insane, deaf, dumb, or blind. Women were raised with the misconception that “woman’s place [was] derived from some mythic age of chivalry” (Contexts of the Awakening). However, by the end of the century, women gained representation across a bevy of professions, and in Louisiana “only 9 of the 369 professions” were not represented by women. The steady emergence of women in the world of man served as the historical context for which the story of The Awakening, and to a similar extent The Yellow Wallpaper, were influenced by.

The attempts of men to do what they think is right can create a clash between a woman’s self and the expectations that are placed on her. In The Yellow Wallpaper, the narrator is virtually confined in an ancestral hall by her husband in an attempt to ease her nerves. Noticing the isolation of the house, the narrator notes that “there is something queer about it,” but her skepticism is only met with laughter from her husband: “he scoffs openly at any talks of things not to be felt and seen” (The Yellow Wallpaper Page 1). John, the narrator’s husband, attempts to use the rest cure on his wife as a treatment, putting her through a long period of isolation from friends and family and constant bed rest (Lister). While John is shown to truly care about his wife, he is also condescending and controlling. By isolating the narrator in the nursery, where the window is lined with bars and the bed is nailed down, John is open in the way he demeans his wife, treating her as if she is an infant locked up in a room. Later, he dismisses the

wife's words that "congenial work, with excitement and change, would do me good" (The Yellow Wallpaper Page 2). The narrator describes that writing in the journal acts as "a great relief to [her] mind," and helps her depression, yet John attempts to suppress it - creating an inner turmoil within the narrator (The Yellow Wallpaper Page 1). The narrator wishes to write freely, as it helps her express her feelings freely without anyone monitoring her, but she also does not want John to know that she is opposing his orders. Over time, the narrator "get[s] a little afraid of John," and her cautiousness turns to paranoia; she stays awake at night thinking that John is the one going insane and is acting oddly. Writing once helped the narrator express her thoughts freely, but attempting to shroud her journal in secrecy contributes to her insanity (The Yellow Wallpaper Page 7).

As the pressures of her husband's expectations and demands continue to gnaw on the narrator's mental state, she finds that madness is the only escape. The narrator's mind is best viewed through the yellow wallpaper. Originally, she describes the color of the wallpaper to be a "smouldering unclean yellow … a dull yet lurid orange in some places, a sickly sulphur tint in others" (The Yellow Wallpaper Page 3). As time passes, the narrator begins to see different details within the paper, picking out the "two bulbous eyes [that] stare at you," or the "formless sort of figure, that seems to skulk about;" eventually, she's become really fond of her room "because of the wallpaper" (The Yellow Wallpaper Page 4). To her, the wallpaper represents a secret that only she can keep - away from the control that her husband held over her. As the narrator feels even more enclosed by her husband's stipulations, the figures within the paper begin to solidify. The narrator notices a woman in the wallpaper that is trapped just like herself, unable to break the patterns that imprison her. She focuses on her counterpart and both agree the only way to escape is by tearing down the wallpaper - embracing madness as her only avenue to freedom.

In The Awakening, Edna goes through an awakening as she realizes that she cannot live within the narrow confines that society has set for women. Edna is stuck in the roles of a mother and a wife - two burdens she privately shows distaste for. Voicing her opinions against existing as what society dictates to be a "perfect woman," Edna looks to break free of the bonds that mark her as the wife of Leonce Pontellier and a mother of two children: "I don't want anything but my own way. That is wanting a good deal, of course, when you have to trample upon the lives, the hearts, the prejudices of others" (The Awakening Chapter XXXVIII). Her journey begins with her spending more time with her best friend, and hopeful lover, Robert. Edna's time with Robert gives her an opportunity to finally express the passion that she had been suppressing with Leonce. Yet, while Edna can attempt to ignore the expectations of society, Robert cannot and finally chooses to say farewell, "I love you. Goodbye because I love you" (The Awakening Chapter XXXVIII). Later, Edna explores her new-found sexuality with Alcee, but realizes that she is still under the influence of another man - exactly what she wanted to flee in the first place. Edna embarks on a journey looking for an out from the demands that had been placed on her; she does not wish to repress her desires, but boldly express them. While she wants to become deaf to the calls of the public, she is unwilling to banish herself entirely. Edna's journey towards independence does allow her a temporary escape from expectation, but Edna realizes that she will never be independent of society, of her husband, and of herself. At that point, Edna understands the hidden nature of what it means to truly be free - how she must set aside her garments, dip into the water, and enter oblivion.

On her journey, Edna struggles to find a balance between living the isolated but fruitful life of Mademoiselle Reisz, or the joyous but insignificant life of Adele. To Edna, Adele exemplifies the

“mother woman,” a person “who idolized their children, worshipped their husbands and esteemed it a holy privilege to efface themselves as individuals and grow wings as ministering angels” (The Awakening Chapter IV). Adele does not understand Edna’s quest for independence, nor does she need it. Adele is happy to take care of her children all day and be a good wife to her husband. She is so proud of being a mother that Adele has few goals of her own - but she is content with her life. Yet, even Adele’s perfection has holes. By living up to society’s wish for a woman, Adele loses her individuality and her ambition - something which Edna wishes to avoid: “I would give my money, I would give my life for my children, but I wouldn’t give myself” (The Awakening Chapter XVI). Adele’s own interests, such as playing the piano, aren’t even her own passions - she plays because her children enjoy it. Her entire life is dedicated to her children, which while not inherently a bad thing, displays Adele’s acceptance to giving up her own success for that of the rest of the family. If all women were to follow Adele’s path, they might be happy, but would fail to contribute to the progress, empowerment, and advancements for women. In doubt of Adele’s choices, Edna is attracted to the way that Mademoiselle Reisz’s renounces society. Reisz lacks Adele’s motherly tendencies and femininity. She seems unattractive and never had any romantic partners. However, it is Mademoiselle Reisz who has achieved the highest state of freedom in the novel. Her greatest talent is her music, which she chooses to cultivate for her own satisfaction. To do this, Reisz isolated herself from others, and isolated herself from the principles and expectations that would have been forced upon her. After all, “The artist must possess the courageous soul … the soul that dares and defies” (The Awakening Chapter XXI). Reisz certainly possesses that courageous soul; she is a living example of what Edna could have become, had she not married or had children.

Unfortunately, Edna can’t be Adele or Mademoiselle Reisz - it’s not workable due to the decisions that she’s already made. A key aspect of Mademoiselle Reisz’s character that stands out to Edna is her talent with music; she’s an expert. Because she is incredible with many different musical instruments, Reisz is still tolerated in society and she has a passion that lends her willpower. However, Edna is a relative amateur and isn’t nearly as accomplished a painter as Reisz. Edna was never encouraged to explore her individuality and talent; due to this, she does not have the mental willpower needed to live in exile. Edna also rejects the lifestyle that Adele lives - she wants a life away from her children, and a life where she can freely express her feelings. Unlike Adele, Edna wants her own independence. Ultimately, Edna realizes that no matter what, she was incompatible with the expectations that had been placed on her - she could never be in harmony with her ideal self.

The conclusions of The Awakening and The Yellow Wallpaper were similar - the narrator and Edna are unable to live within the boundaries that had been drawn by men in the 19th century and look to actively reclaim their freedom. Yet, by the end of their novels, the main characters are either insane or dead, suggesting that for most women, freedom was associated with consequence and sacrifice. Both Chopin and Gilman looked to communicate to the public that there needed to be more choices and options for women that felt out of place in a patriarchal society. They wanted to convey the message that for many women, the status quo was borderline-hellish, and unfortunately, there were few avenues they could turn to (Why I Wrote the Yellow Wallpaper). Spreading complex messages in an attempt to change the future outlook of women, the authors sent a warning about what happens when the expectations of women are so narrow.