Subversion of the Cult of True Womanhood in Kate Chopin's novel "The Awakening" and Charlotte Perkins Gilman's short story "The Yellow Wallpaper"

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Subversion of the Cult of True Womanood in Kate Chopin's novel *The Awakening* and Charlotte Perkins Gilman's short story „The Yellow Wallpaper“ (Subverzija kulta pravog ženstva u romanu *Buđenje* Kate Chopin i pripovjetci „Žuta tapeta“ Charlotte Perkins Gilman)

Završni rad

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Osijek, 2011.

Summary

The paper explains what the Cult of True Womanhood is and how it manifested itself in the period of its strongest influence, the nineteenth century. It goes on to explain how it degraded women, and how certain Victorian writers saw it fit to deny virtues it expected of women by means of their literary work. Subversion of this Cult is observed on two works by two authors; Kate Chopin and her novel *The Awakening*, and Charlotte Perkins Gilman and her short story „The Yellow Wallpaper“. On various examples and quotations, it explains how the authors rebelled against the norm forced upon women by Victorian society. The paper concludes these two literary efforts to be the cornerstone of future feminist literature.

Key words: subversion, true womanhood, oppression, Kate Chopin, Charlotte Perkins Gilman

Contents:

Introduction

This paper will try to observe and explain the Cult of True Womanhood, and ideal of virtues forced upon Victorian women, as well as illustrate how the Cult was attacked and subverted by two authors of the period, Kate Chopin and Charlotte Perkins Gilman. Chopin's novel *The Awakening* and Gilman's short story "The Yellow Wallpaper" deny almost every convention and virtue that society of the nineteenth century held feminine and expected women to possess; both authors led unconventional lives themselves and strongly opposed the imprisonment women had to endure for the sake of "womanhood". Women did nothing for their own sake; they were expected to be mothers, wives, entertainers, and angels of the house, following every order and whim expressed by their husbands. If they had any thoughts of their own, they were better off keeping them to themselves rather than bother their spouses with such trifles. A woman was to stay at home at all times to keep it warm and safe for her family – the public life was reserved solely for man. Most women accepted these terms of life as rules they must blindly obey and follow, but the likes of Chopin and Gilman stood up to them, fighting prejudice both through their literary and public lives.

1. The Cult of True Womanhood

The Cult of True Womanhood is a term coined and defined by historian Barbara Welter in her essay on roles and virtues of 19th century women. Sometimes also called the Cult of Domesticity, the Cult of True Womanhood sought to assert that womanly virtue resided in piety, purity, submissiveness and domesticity (Welter 152), all of which will be explained further on in this text.

These assertions about the roles of 19th century women most probably served as a response to the growth of industrial capitalism. Between 1820 and the Civil War a new middle class was created in America, as a result of new industries, businesses and professions, and the man began working long hours in the cruel world of a materialistic society. The new middle-class family differed from the preindustrial one in at least three ways:

1) A 19th century middle-class family did not have to make by its own hand what it needed in order to survive, but rather had men work in jobs that produced goods or services while their wives stayed at home caring for the children and household;

2) By leaving off to work, men contributed to the forming of a view that they alone should support the family, and a woman's place was no other than the domestic, or private, sphere – their home. The world of work was a public sphere, a rough world that dictated men to do what they must in order to succeed, and it was violent, full of trouble and temptation. Since women were such weak and delicate creatures, one could only have assumed that those women who ventured in the public sphere would easily fall prey to its atrocities;

3) The nuclear family became regarded as the backbone of society, and while kin and community remained important, they were not nearly as appreciated as they once were.

A new ideal of womanhood, as well as a new ideology about the home, emerged out of these new attitudes about work and family. Men were encouraged to seek a wife with attributes of chastity, sobriety, industry, frugality, cleanliness, domestic knowledge, good temper, and beauty. This ideal also provided a new view of women's duty and role while cataloging the cardinal virtues of True Womanhood for a new age (Lavender). If anyone dared to tamper with the complex of virtues that made up True Womanhood, they were immediately damned as the enemy of God, civilization, and the Republic. As stated above, True Womanhood could be divided into four major virtues, which are piety, purity, submissiveness, and domesticity, and it was by these virtues that a woman judged herself and was judged by society.

Woman's greatest strength, and its sole source, was religion or piety. It was believed that if piety was present in a woman, all else would follow, so young men in search of a mate were advised, if not cautioned, to look for a pious one. Women were thought to be especially

susceptible to religion, which was supported by a number of biblical quotations. Their holy duty was to bring light to the world and make it better; the woman would be another, better Eve, working in cooperation with none other than God, bringing the world back from and clearing it of "its revolt and sin". It was also considered that a woman's sufferings were increased by God so that she would more easily accept the terms of salvation.

One Dr. Charles Meigs, in explaining why women were naturally religious, said that "hers is a pious mind. Her confiding nature leads her more readily than men to accept the proffered grace of the Gospel" (Welter 153). Meigs, and a number of others who shared his opinion on women and piety, including Caleb Atwater and Mrs. John Sanford, spoke of religion as a kind of tranquilizer for the many undefined longings which swept even the most pious young girl, and about which it was better to pray than to think (Welter 153).

One of the main reasons religion was valued as a true woman's virtue was that it did not take her away from her "proper sphere", which was her home. Church work would not make her less domestic or submissive to her husband, unlike participation in other activities, and religious work seemed to promote the very qualities a true woman was to have, so it was quite acceptable for her to be pious and practice religion.

Women's education revolved almost exclusively around religion. Women were warned not to let their literary or intellectual pursuits take them away from God, for where religion was so vital to a woman, irreligion was almost too awful to contemplate. A gentleman writing on "Female Irreligion" reminded his readers that "a woman never looks lovelier than in her reverence for religion" and "female irreligion is the most revolting feature in human character" (Welter 154).

Next to piety, it was purity that bore just as much importance to a young woman, who was deemed unnatural and unfeminine if in absence of it and no woman at all, for that matter. According to women's magazines of the 19th century, to be guilty of such a crime as the loss of purity brought madness to the woman, or even death. She was to keep her treasure safe until the night of her wedding: "The marriage night was the single great event of a woman's life, when she bestowed her greatest treasure upon her husband, and from that time on was completely dependent upon him, an empty vessel, without legal or emotional existence of her own" (Welter 155). All women were urged, if they aimed toward being True Women, to maintain the virtue that is their purity and source of power, for they would be left in silent sadness to contemplate their imbecility and premature prostitution if they failed to do so.

This priceless virtue was massively accepted among women themselves, with pride, but lady-like, suitable modesty. A magazine called *The Ladies' Wreath* claimed purity to be the

woman's weapon, her greatest gift and means of bringing peace and salvation to the world: "Purity is the highest beauty – the true pole-star which is to guide humanity aright in its long, varied, and perilous voyage" (Welter 157). Despite this virtue being acknowledged among the majority of women, sometimes a woman could not see the dangers threatening her treasure, in which case they were pointed out to her, and usually by a male. Some such dangers included any kind of social change, which was for example a new fashion in which women wore their dresses, so an issue of *The Ladies' Wreath* addressed this attack on woman's virtue, proclaiming it a manifestation of socialism and thus dangerous and inappropriate.

The most feminine virtue expected to be present in a true woman was submission. Like women, men were also supposed to be religious, but rarely had time for it, and unlike women, were not scorned for it; they were supposed to be pure, but it came awfully hard to them – they were forgiven for this as well, because they were the movers, the builders, the doers and the actors. On the other hand, women were passive and submissive in their dialogue and interaction with men, and inferior to them by God's own appointment. If women were to tamper with the quality of submission, they also tampered with the order of the Universe, to which they were supposed to restore equilibrium.

The lesson of submission was forced upon a woman, and hers was a life of suppressing emotions. Women were to repress harsh answers, confess their faults, and to stop in the midst of self-defense while arguing with their husbands, no matter right or wrong; only the husband was always in the right, and the woman was to bow down her head in gentle submission. Women in 19th century fiction were delicate creatures, innocent victims suffering without sin and too good for this world, at the same time too weak to resist the horrors it brings. Knowing what dangers lay in the public sphere, the best refuge for these passive women was the safety of their own home, the domestic sphere.

Domesticity is yet another important virtue most prized by women's magazines of the era, as well as women themselves, believing it is their sacred duty to perform their social and family obligations imposed on them by these magazines. Sacred Scripture re-enforced social pressure, claiming St. Paul knew what was best for women, advising them to be domestic, since the home provided security from all kinds of evils and delusions the world might force upon a woman.

The woman was a comforter, and her most important role and function as one, was that of a nurse. Nursing the sick, particularly sick males, not only made a woman feel useful and accomplished, but increased her influence in her home and society in general.

Furthermore, as a part of her domesticity, woman was the highest adornment of civilization in the home, but was also supposed to keep busy with morally uplifting tasks, which were, fortunately, most of the housework, when looked at in a womanly fashion. Despite all these qualities, the female was dangerously addicted to novels, according to the literature of the period, and seeing as they interfered with "serious piety", she should by all means avoid them. No matter what anyone claimed later on, the 19th century simply knew that girls could, as a fact, be ruined by a book. Exciting and dangerous books would unsettle them and cause them to lose their true way and place, and "throw the world into confusion." In case she couldn't help herself, she should only read verified, morally acceptable authors, but on the whole, religious biography was best. Women's magazines, however, which provided these insights, could be read without fear that a woman would lose interest in her domestic duties.

As far as marriage was concerned, it, as a rule, increased the authority of a woman and improved her character, giving her a more dignified position in society. While a woman was encouraged to marry, she should not have done so for money, but for true love, casting aside the shackles of a materialistic society. Corollary to marriage was motherhood, which added another dimension to the woman's usefulness and prestige, and gaining her an increase in power.

Other than being a crown to her womanhood, being a mother also anchored the woman even more firmly and securely to her rightful, domestic sphere. A true woman was to love her children with all her heart, and she naturally did; to suggest otherwise was monstrous. In addition to loving them and caring for them, women were responsible for being teachers to their children, implementing virtues in their mind, since their husbands were so very often busy earning their dollars. Staying home with "her Bible and a well-balanced mind" and being blessed with a quiet life while her man was out in the wilderness of the world, exposed to conflict and evil, the woman was trusted with raising her sons to be good "Americans" (Welter 172).

Baring all of the above in mind, it is no great wonder that women chose to embrace these feminine virtues as a given. They were made to believe that if they chose to listen to other voices than those of their proper mentors (male driven society and female magazines of the period), sought other rooms than those of their home, "society shall break up and become a chaos of disjointed and unsightly elements" (Welter 173). No woman in her right mind would dare bear the immense responsibility of bringing the world to its knees before the evil that emerged from her disobedience.

2. Subverting cultural hegemony

Some of the 19th century writers, including, particularly, feminist writers, thought it fit to propose that the predominant cultural forces, such as patriarchy, should be subverted. The Cult of True Womanhood was most definitely a predominant cultural force, dictating roles of women by the firm man's hand. As Barbara Welters states in her essay, "The very perfection of True Womanhood carried within itself the seeds of its own destruction. For, if woman were so very little less than the angels, she should surely take a more active part in running the world, especially since men were making such a hash of things" (Welter 174). Two literary works in which the subversion of the Cult of True Womanhood is to be depicted in this paper are *The Awakening*, a novel, and "The Yellow Wallpaper", a short story. Kate Chopin's *The Awakening* was, at the time of its publishing in 1899, one of those immoral novels girls and women were strongly advised to avoid, and had been harshly scorned by society and critics alike, leaving Chopin to suffer irreparable damage to both her literary and social reputations. Denying the cult of true womanhood and its virtues, Chopin's novel was very controversial, and even banned from some cities' libraries. It defied society's norms, and the author could not be easily forgiven. "The Yellow Wallpaper" by Charlotte Perkins Gilman was first published in 1892, and was not nearly as controversial as *The Awakening*. Despite it not being controversial or groundbreaking, it is considered to be an important early work of American feminist literature, condemning andocentric society and entrapment of women in their own homes, being made prisoners to their husbands.

3. Kate Chopin

Kate Chopin was born Katherine O'Flaherty, February 8, 1851 in St. Louis, Missouri, and died August 22, 1904 in the very same city. She was an American author and is now widely considered to have been a predecessor of feminist authors of the 20th century. At the age of 20, she married Oscar Chopin and settled in New Orleans, where she gave birth to all six of their children by the time she turned 29. She began writing after finding herself in a state of depression caused by the deaths of her husband in 1882, and her mother a few years later. Different lifestyles she led throughout her life allowed her different views and insights on the ways of the 19th century society, and provided her with enough insight to analyze the world around her. Through her stories, Kate Chopin wrote her autobiography and documented her surroundings, which, in her time, included the abolitionist movements and the emergence of feminism. Even though her ideas and portrayals were not true word for word, there was a sense of nonfiction and reality creeping throughout each of her literary works. Chopin took strong interest in her surroundings and put many of her observations to words, including those on the man-driven world which undermined women and their value, so she undermined patriarchy (Wikipedia).

The Awakening was published in 1899 and brought little but trouble for Kate Chopin. It centers on a young woman, Edna Pontellier, who does the unthinkable and defies the social norms of her time. She breaks through the role appointed to her by society and discovers herself, her own identity independent of her husband and children and her roles as a wife and mother, completely ignoring the conventions of what would later be known as the Cult of True Womanhood. Critics were united in shunning her work, declaring that the novel "leaves one sick of human nature" (Gilbert 8), or that "it is not a healthy book", and also that "the purport of the story can hardly be described in language fit for publication". The general dissatisfactory tone in which the novel was discussed led to it being banned in the libraries of Chopin's native city, and the author herself was even refused membership in the St. Louis Fine Arts Club. Her royalties for the book were minimal, if not less, and the novel gave her such a bad name that the publisher of *The Awakening* rejected to print her collection of short stories. As well as by critics, Chopin was shunned by a number of acquaintances, leaving her social and professional reputation damaged, even broken beyond repair (Gilbert 9)

3.1. Subversion of the Cult of True Womanhood in Kate Chopin's *The Awakening*

The title of the novel itself foreshadows what the story will bring forward, suggesting a transition from traditional female submissiveness into the newly found independence of a woman – naming it *The Awakening* presents an idea of a sleeping individual not aware of themselves, finally awoken and trying to grasp the vastness of the world and its opportunities. Chopin's main tool of subversion in this novel is her main character, one Edna Pontellier, who acts upon her whims like no other true woman would, after almost three decades of submission. In her beginning state of submissiveness, Edna is a devoted wife and mother, comfortable in her marriage to Léonce Pontellier and utterly unaware of her own feelings, desires and ambitions. She had never been the perfect True Woman, but far from the disobedient and independent individual she had grown into as the novel's storyline progressed. This progress is her *awakening* as a free woman, with her own thoughts and wishes, independent of her husband and children she was supposed to live for; Edna had chosen to live for none other but herself, in a society that regarded this decision as utmost arrogance and almost monstrous.

Léonce treats his wife as any Victorian man would – he sees her as an ornament of the house and as his prized possession, there to complete the home, bare children and care for them, and to be the true woman she was expected to be. All of these qualities which he expects of her were not something he explicitly thought she must possess, but were something that came naturally in the order of the Universe, and no one really thought of them as something a woman must try to live up to, rather they were granted as a supposition. In addition to regarding his wife as an ornament: "'You are burnt beyond recognition,' he added, looking at his wife as one looks at a valuable piece of personal property which had suffered some damage" (Chopin 44), Léonce also felt she should listen to his stories when he told them, no matter how tired or uninterested in them she might be, for he was her husband and she was to acknowledge him.

Edna displays her distinctiveness from the ideal of a true woman early on in the novel, when her husband accuses her of being negligent of their two young sons, motherhood being one of the essential jobs a woman must perform with vigor and sense of duty:

> In short, Mrs. Pontellier was not a 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 (Chopin 51).

As if to emphasize Edna's difference, Chopin pushes her heroine into a lair of perfect women, making her painfully aware she will never be one of them. This is also interesting, for Edna, being amidst the very center of true womanhood at its perfection, decides to abandon it – just as Barbara Welter suggested in her essay when stating that "perfection of true womanhood carries within itself the seed of its destruction" (174). The first visible detachment from the true woman then, was Edna's lack of utter motherly love. When the children are away at their grandmother's for a longer period of time, Edna would feel their absence as a sort of relief, though she would never admit this even to herself. It "seemed to free her of a responsibility which she had blindly assumed and for which Fate had not fitted her" (Chopin 63). Furthermore, as if the accusation of negligence over her brood was not disturbing enough, Edna defies her husband by denying him an answer; not a very heated defiance, but defiance nonetheless. After Léonce insisted that their son Raoul is with fever and complained she was once again disregarding the children: "Mrs. Pontellier sprang out of bed and went into the next room. She soon came back and sat on the edge of the bed, leaning her head down on the pillow. She said nothing and refused to answer her husband when he questioned her" (Chopin 48). Though a small act of defiance, Chopin with it announced an avalanche of stronger and more frequent ones, attacking the myth of the Cult of True Womanhood and shocking and disgusting her audiences, who were safely shrouded in the veil of the very same myth.

The beginning of Edna's awakening is not very subtly announced, stating that "In short, Mrs. Pontellier was beginning to realize her position in the universe as a human being, and to recognize her relations as an individual to the world within and about her" (Chopin 57), after a trip to the beach with a young man, Robert. Shockingly, a woman discovers she is more than her husband's puppet and that of society; she realizes the possibility of having a mind of her own and pursuing her desires. Edna welcomes the world after a life of submission, and it was only the tip of the iceberg. Her outward existence which conforms began to loosen before the inward life she led until then, full of questions and doubts, with no reserves.

Edna displays severe lack of submission as her awakening continues to open her eyes, depriving her of her most feminine virtue. After she refused to come in one night after her husband demanded it of her, she realizes what a feeble person she had been, always conforming to her husband's wishes:

> She heard him moving about the room; every sound indicating impatience and irritation. 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 (Chopin 77).

Still resisting her husband's authority in an unfeminine manner, Edna wonders why she had submitted to his commands as many times as she did in the past: "She wondered if her husband had ever spoken to her like that before, and if she had submitted to his command. Of course she had; she remembered that she had. But she could not realize why or how she should have yielded, feeling as she then did" (Chopin 78). For the first time in her life, Edna does not jump to her feet to please her husband with her submissiveness, but refuses his control over her and does as she wishes. Chopin highlights the fact that as Edna's thoughts and emotions begin to change, she becomes more self-aware and begins to analyze her former behavior (Sparknotes). She dismisses the typical submissiveness of a True Woman.

Chopin introduces Edna as not very motherly or submissive in many points of the novel, which is quite a great and obvious subversion of a True Woman's conventions:

> Edna had once told Madame Ratignolle that she would never sacrifice herself for her children, of for any one. Then had followed a rather heated argument; the two women did not appear to understand each other or to be talking the same language. Edna tried to appease her friend, to explain.
>
> "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" (Chopin 97)

Adèle Ratignolle is by all means a True Woman and an indubitable representative of the Cult of True Womanhood. She is a devoted wife and mother and the epitome of 19th century womanhood, spending her days caring for her children, performing her domestic duties and ensuring the happiness of her husband (Sparknotes). Chopin used Adèle symbolically as the Cult in its whole and a catalyst for Edna's movement away from such a lifestyle. Adèle is comfortable and even happy with her simple, conformist existence (Sparknotes), and while she should serve as an example to Edna, her words and actions had quite the opposite effect, leading Edna to deny and ignore all virtues expected of her. She defied the belief of the time that women were simply the property of their husbands, who served a specific role as wives and mothers and devoted themselves solely to those around them at their own expense. While Edna contemplates her life throughout the plot, and presents many different musings about her existence, Adèle is a static character that shows neither change nor growth from the beginning of the novel to its very end (Sparknotes). Since Adèle represents the ideal that was expected of a woman, her lack of growth can be perceived as characteristic of all women who strived to reach the perfection forced upon them; never using their own head, they stay in the same place their whole lives, serving others

while they move forward. Expected to perform their domestic duties and care for the health and happiness of their families, Victorian women were prevented from seeking the satisfaction of their own wants and needs.

Edna fights the conventions both metaphorically and literary, at one time flinging her wedding ring angrily on the floor, trying to destroy it: "Once she stopped, and taking off her wedding ring, flung it upon the carpet. When she saw it lying there, she stamped her heel upon it, striving to crush it. But her small boot heel did not make an indenture, not a mark upon the little glittering circlet" (Chopin 103). Edna tramples on the society's pressure and defies it vigorously, but her effort alone can never be sufficient to tear down the walls of prejudice. She is just an individual, and not strong enough to endure her defiance alone, so her heel makes not a slightest indenture on the ring that symbolizes her entrapment in marriage, as well as that of not a few Victorian women. Despite this, Edna continues to fight:

> Mr. Pontellier had been a rather courteous husband so long as he met a certain tacit submissiveness in his wife. But her new and unexpected line of conduct completely bewildered him. It shocked him. Then her absolute disregard for her duties as a wife angered him. When Mr. Pontellier became rude, Edna grew insolent. She had resolved never to take another step backward. (Chopin 108)

Moreover, Edna denies the virtue of domesticity. She abandoned her Tuesdays at home, which were a time when she would meet various guests in her husband's house, ignoring all her acquaintances and wandering the streets alone. She refused to be confined to the house like one of her husband's possessions. When she moved from her proper domestic sphere of her husband's house and into the pigeon house, she completely cast off her allegiance to Léonce: "Whatever was her own in the house, everything which she had acquired aside from her husband's bounty, she caused to be transported to the other house, supplying simple and meager deficiencies from her own resources" (Chopin 140). After braving the obstacles set before her, "every step which she took toward relieving herself from obligations added to her strength and expansion as an individual" (Chopin 151).

Still, towards the end of her awakening, Edna realizes that she is too weak and too alone to withstand the test of prejudice, and it is finally the thought of her children that breaks her: "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. But she knew a way to elude them" (Chopin 175). Edna was not strong enough of an individual to move boundaries that needed moving. She wasn't ready to move away too much from her familiar surroundings, only resettling in a house as distant as a walk away from her husband's. As a

pioneer of female independence, she quickly became tired of swimming away from the conventions of true womanhood, for she wasn't ready for what the independence brought to her. Through the character of Edna, Chopin denied many virtues that made up a true woman, the angel of the house, but alone in her effort, Edna's wings were just not prepared for such a weight upon them: "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" (Chopin 138).

4. Charlotte Perkins Gilman

Charlotte Perkins Gilman, a prominent American sociologist, novelist, writer and lecturer for social reform was born on July 3, 1860 in Hartford, Connecticut, and in January 1932, she was diagnosed with incurable breast cancer. Being an advocate of euthanasia for the terminally ill, Gilman committed suicide on August 17, 1935 by taking an overdose of chloroform, stating in her suicide note that she "chose chloroform over cancer", dying quickly and quietly. She was a utopian feminist during a time when her accomplishments were exceptional for women, and, because of her unorthodox concepts and lifestyle, served as a role model for future generations of feminists. Gilman was a humanist and believed the domestic environment oppressed women through the patriarchal beliefs upheld by society, and fought to present a different view to women. In 1884, she married Charles Walter Stetson after initially declining his proposal, and their only child, Katharine Beecher Stetson, was born the following year. Gilman suffered a very serious outbreak of post-partum depression in the months after her child's birth. She lived in an age in which women were seen as "hysterical" and "nervous" beings, meaning that when a woman claimed to be seriously ill after giving birth, her claims were too often dismissed as being invalid and a product of her hysteria. In 1888, Charlotte separated from her husband, which was more than a rare occurrence in the late nineteenth century, and frequently frowned upon (Wikipedia).

Her most notable work, "The Yellow Wallpaper", is a short story published in 1892. Not as controversial as Chopin's novel, Gilman's short story was first met with mixed reception, but eventually began to win over its audience. It is written in epistolary style, from a (first person) point of view of a woman confined to the bedroom by her physician husband, left there to recuperate from her depression and a slight hysterical tendency. She becomes obsessed with the room's revolting yellow wallpaper and eventually her mind deteriorates into a hysterical state. Gilman wrote this story to change people's minds about the role of women in society, illustrating how women's lack of autonomy is detrimental to their mental, emotional, and even physical wellbeing (Wikipedia).

4.1. Subversion of the Cult of True Womanhood in Charlotte Perkins Gilman's "The Yellow Wallpaper"

The concept of wallpaper instantly brings forward thoughts of women, for it is characteristically a feminine, floral decoration on interior walls of homes, but is in this short story presented as a symbol of women's imprisonment within the domestic sphere (Gradesaver). "The Yellow Wallpaper" also tells a story of general female oppression by the patriarchic society, forcing upon them motherhood, wifehood and lock down within their home.

The narrator, and the main protagonist of the story, supposedly suffers from neurasthenia, the only cure being the "rest cure" and is ordered by her physician husband to stay in the room and rest as much as she can, until he finds she has improved in health. The narrator, however, does not believe this to be the case, nor does she believe rest to be the best medicine:

> 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? (…) Personally, I disagree with their ideas. Personally, I believe that congenial work, with excitement and change, would do me good. But what is one to do? (Gilman)

The patient's thoughts on the illness bore no meaning or importance to the doctors of that age, so John, the narrator's husband, thinks nothing more of his wife's worries than being a useless chatter. John is also a typical 19th century husband, letting his wife do little without guidance provided by him: "He is very careful and loving, and hardly lets me stir without special direction" (Gilman). He confines her in a room where she is to take time to recover, disregarding her wishes, for he alone knows what is best for her. She was, in spirit of that age, expected to be submissive and do as her husband wishes, disregarding her concerns about rest being what was best for her health. A large part of the rest cure he forced upon her consists of his attempts to remove her creativity and force her to give up writing (Gradesaver): "There comes John, and I must put this away, - he hates to have me write a word" (Gilman). By forcing her to give up writing, he hopes to calm her anxious nature and help her assume her role as an ideal wife and mother.

Much like Chopin, Gilman also offers an ideal alternative to the unorthodox protagonist. Since the narrator is sick, she is unable to perform her motherly and domestic duties, and the two are entrusted with two women, Mary and Jennie. Mary, being the nanny, is immediately presented as an ideal motherly figure, an ideal emphasized by the choice of her name: evoking the image of Virgin Mary, it brings forward a stereotype of ideal motherhood (Gradesaver), which the narrator certainly is not. Mary being the surrogate to the narrator's motherhood, Jennie

is a surrogate in all other wifely duties neglected (because of her illness) by the protagonist: “It is fortunate Mary is so good with the baby. Such a dear baby! And yet I CANNOT be with him, it makes me so nervous” (Gilman). The narrator even says about Jennie, before hiding her writing from her: “She is a perfect and enthusiastic housekeeper, and hopes for no better profession” (Gilman), and confirms that, according to the social norms of the period, women were expected to fulfill their duties as wives and mothers and be content with their existence as nothing more (Gradesaver). Men and women were divided into separate spheres, the public and domestic one, where women were doomed to spend their lives solely in the domestic sphere.

The yellow wallpaper on the wall of the old nursery where the narrator is almost held captive, serves to show oppression that women endured to be kept within walls of their home. The pattern on the wallpaper gradually forms the shape of a woman. At first, the narrator can only be sure it suggests a face: “There is a recurrent spot where the pattern lolls like a broken neck and two bulbous eyes stare at you upside down” (Gilman). As time passes, she begins to distinguish a figure: “But in the places where it isn’t faded and where the sun is just so – I can see a strange, provoking, formless sort of figure, that seems to skulk about behind that silly and conspicuous front design” (Gilman). The dim shapes behind that curious outside patter became clearer to the narrator every day, and she unknowingly started to identify with the figure on the wallpaper. Just as the narrator wanted out of her imprisonment, the shape on the wallpaper seemed to have wanted the same: “The faint figure behind seemed to shake the pattern, just as if she wanted to get out” (Gilman). The narrator later finds the figure most definitely to be a woman, trapped behind the pattern that she recognizes as bars:

> At any kind of light, in twilight, candle light, lamplight, and worst of all by moonlight, it becomes bars! The outside pattern I mean, and the woman behind it is as plain as can be. I didn’t realize 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. By daylight she is subdued, quiet. I fancy it is the pattern that keeps her so still. (Gilman)

The woman behind bars not only represents the narrator, but womankind in general, who were oppressed by society to a point of feeling as if in a prison, and trying to break free and destroy the bars keeping them inside:

> The front pattern DOES move – and no wonder! The woman behind shakes it! Sometimes I think there are a great many women behind, and sometimes only one, and she crawls around fast, and her crawling shakes it all over. Then in the very bright spots she keeps still, and in the very shady spots she just takes hold of the bars and shakes them

> hard. And she 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. (Gilman)

Similar to the woman (and women) in the wallpaper, the narrator "shook her bars" only at night, when her husband was not around to control her. She is free to do as she likes at night, investigating the wallpaper, refusing to listen to her husband John. During daylight, both women (as well as the many women behind pattern barns) are seemingly submissive, conforming to society's norms and being imprisoned within the domestic sphere. But as soon as the spotlight is off, they fight to cast off the shackles of oppression. They were not safe to try and bring down the social order in plain sight; they had to creep in the shadows, setting the cornerstone of feminist uprising, slowly and secretly crawling about being its first stage.

Conclusion

Women's shoulders were burdened with many a form of oppression in the nineteenth century. They were confined to their homes in pursuit of the ideal of motherhood, wifehood and domesticity; in short, they were victims of the Cult of True Womanhood. The Cult sought to assert upon women four virtues that were to be fulfilled: piety, purity, submissiveness and domesticity. A woman lacking in at least one of these virtues, let alone all of them, was by all means no True Woman at all. Confined to the domestic sphere, a woman had no freedom to move about the world as she pleases, and was not entitled to any sort of radical, or any, opinions of her own, depending entirely on her husband. A few individuals saw it fit to oppose these social norms, and through their literary work attacked the Cult of True Womanhood. In *The Awakening* and "The Yellow Wallpaper", Kate Chopin and Charlotte Perkins Gilman presented to the world a non-conformist heroine, fighting back the man-driven society. They paved the way for feminist literature and tore down many a prejudice with their writing, but the battle for the free woman continued, and lasts still.

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