The Awakening of the "New Woman" in Nineteenth-Century American Literature

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Introduction

This research paper has been written as the analysis of three literary texts – Kate Chopin's novel *The Awakening* (1899), Susan Glaspell's play *Trifles* (1916) and Virginia Woolf's essay on feminism *A Room of One's Own* (1929). The point was to show the birth of what critics call "the New Woman" at the end of the nineteenth and beginning of the twentieth century.

1. Susan Glaspell's *Trifles*

1.1. The Life of the Author

American Pulitzer Prize-winning playwright, actress, and novelist, Susan Glaspell was born in Iowa on July 1, 1876. After graduating from university, she worked as a journalist on the staff of the *Des Moines Daily News*. Her stories began appearing in different magazines and she published her first novel, *the Glory of the Conquered*, in 1909, and her second novel *The Visioning* in 1911.

She was a founding member with George Cook of the Provincetown Players, one of the developers of modern drama in the United States. Much of Glaspell's writing is strongly feminist, dealing with the roles that women play, or are forced to play, in society and the relationships between men and women.

She wrote more than ten plays for the Provincetown Players, including *Women's Honor* (1918), *Bernice* (1919), *Inheritors (1921), and the Verge* (1922). In 1931 she won the Pulitzer Prize for *Alison's House*, a play based loosely on the life and family of Emily Dickinson. Glaspell's work also includes novels and collections of short stories. (*Spartacus Educational*)

1.2. About *Trifles*

Susan Glaspell's *Trifles* is a play in one act about a woman named Minnie Foster who has killed her husband in an act of revenge. She did so because he has killed the only thing that she could find happiness in after years and years of marriage, her bird.

The play was first performed on August 2, 1916 in Massachusetts and a year after the play's debut it was adapted into a short story "A Jury of her Peers", loosely based on the murder of John Hossak, which Glaspell covered while working as a journalist. (*Spartacus Educational*) The play is an example of feminist literature where two female characters solve a mystery that the male characters could not, aided by their knowledge of women's psychology.

1.3. The Awakening of "the New Woman" in *Trifles*

The play begins with a dialogue between the sheriff, the county attorney and Mr. Hale about the crime that has taken place in the house of John Wright. They will try to find the evidence of the murder not even understanding that while telling the story of finding the body, the motif for the crime is evident in Minnie Foster's behavior since she "just sat there with her hand held together and looking down (…) and at that she started to laugh, and then she stopped and looked at me [Mr. Hale] – scared" (3). That is the main motif which the men are not aware of – she has done a crime because she was scared.

Holstein at the very beginning of her article mentions that "from the very outset, men and women of the play perceive the setting, the lonely farmhouse, from diverging perspectives." (282). Glaspell brings male characters to try to find evidence to prove the protagonist guilty of the crime, but men look for evidence in a completely wrong environment because the real crime took place elsewhere. The Sheriff, the county Attorney and Mr. Hale try to find the motif for the crime and they look around the bedroom because that is where the victim was found. The thing they seem to be right about is a saying of Mr. Hale that "women are used to worrying about trifles" (4). According to Alkalay-Gut, "underlying this attitude is the assumption that the women's lives are individually trivial, and their only strength and/or success can come from banding together" (1).

Moreover, the two women spend time in the kitchen while men are wandering around the bedroom and outside. The women discover the quilt that has not been finished properly and they cannot imagine the reason behind such bad sewing. The fact makes the men laugh because Mrs. Hale and Mrs. Peters are worrying about the trifles, them "taking up our time with little things while we're waiting for them to get the evidence" (7). It seems almost as if Glaspell wants the men to appear not capable of taking care of the important things, such as finding evidence to put criminals in jail. Even though Mrs. Peters believes that the "the law is the law" (7), she does not stop Mrs. Hale when she starts "just pulling out a stitch or two that's not sewed very good" (7) into the quilt. This is an important part of a sheriff's wife because she has always accepted the rules. By accepting Mrs. Hale's decision to repair the stitching, she experiences an "awakening". As Russell explains, "Mrs. Hale symbolically claims her position as the person who spins the thread of life" (89).

Also, while the men do their search of the house, the protagonist's neighbor, Mrs. Hale and the sheriff's wife, Mrs. Peters, discover a dead bird. The women conclude that Minnie Foster's pet was killed by her husband which must have been the reason for Minnie Foster killing her husband. The reader learns that Minnie Foster used to sing too and the bird stands for

Minnie's singing career. As a result, the reader learns the sad destiny of the protagonist's singing career proves to be the motif for the crime.

Mrs. Peters, who "dispenses the lots in life when she moves to hide the bird" (Rusell 89), experiences a revelation when she wonders how lonely Minnie Foster must have been that she had a dead bird in the kitchen cabinet. She concludes that "Wright [Minnie Foster's husband], wouldn't like the bird – a thing that sang. She used to sing. He killed that, too." (10). Mrs. Peters decided to hide the bird and deny the men ability to conclude what the real reason behind the crime is. The reader learns that "we [all the women] live close together and we live far apart. We all go through the same things – it's just the different kind of the same thing" (11).

Considering the title of the play, "Trifles", there is an evident explanation of how the women of the nineteenth century America were seen, but also of how the women nowadays are still sometimes seen. In many today's societies the male figure of the family is considered the most important and crucial one, the most competent of providing for the family. However, that is not necessarily true. Even though women are often considered lacking in some aspects of life, the history has shown that women are just as competent as men.

In her essay "A Map for Rereading – Gender and the Interpretation of Literary Texts" American feminist critic Annette Kolodny explains that a writer is a response to a writer and that if trying to "understand" and interpret the reading, some would see the synecdoche of a larger whole including other texts. Often, the interpretations learned are necessarily gender-inflected because mostly, until 1850s, the writer was a male (1-4). Therefore, the play could be misinterpreted because of the gender differences. This explains quite well the reason behind Glaspell creating the female characters the true discoverers of the truth because only a woman is the rightful juror to a woman's crime, and only a woman is capable of truly understanding the problems women encounter in their everyday lives.

Kolodny also states that women who write fiction include in their stories the feature that male critics such as Bloom and Iser manage to ignore: "and that is, the crucial importance of the sex of the 'interpreter'" (10). Therefore, we can conclude that Glaspell introduces irony into the story because the men are arrogantly certain that the women would not know a clue even if they miraculously succeeded to actually find it. Thereby, the men leave the discovery of the truth to those who have the proper interpretative strategies, because really only a woman can truly understand other women, also meaning that only a woman can truly read the literary texts another woman has written. Alkalay-Gut presents her approach in understanding the story by arguing in her article "Jury of her Piers: The Importance of Trifles" that the most productive approach to this story is one that acknowledges and, in a way, imitates the pattern of these

women's lives (6-7). This shows greatly that Glaspell has written a text that can be interpreted in many different ways and it is a matter of perception whether that text will truly be "interpreted" or "misinterpreted". The male characters investigating the crime do not perceive that even unimportant things can have their worth, especially for women. That is the reason why the juror of the crime should be a person who understands the female psyche.

Also Kolodny critically concludes that while Glaspell does not necessarily exclude the male reader, she does insist that he is a different kind of reader and that, where women are concerned, he is often an inadequate reader. It is such, she says, because the men cannot recognize the clues they are searching for. Seen from the male point of view, the ending of the investigation is a happy one for Minnie Foster. She will be set free because no motif is found to prosecute her (12-13). The crucial point of this ending is in male character's lacking familiarity and awareness in female universe. Therefore, they cannot comprehend and communicate with female characters to notice the little things that are important to female psyche. Thus, the text functions as a specialized language and further gives access of female meaning to male interpretation.

Similarly to this, Kolodny concludes that men can learn to apprehend the meanings encoded in texts by and about women, just as women have learned to become sensitive readers of Shakespeare, Milton and Hemingway, because, after all, the reading process brings about the problem of "reading" correctly within "differently structured conceptual worlds" (13).

To conclude, those "trifles" that sometimes seem the most insignificant, such as the bad sewing on the quilt, the broken cage door, tell the true story behind the events. Throughout the play men are not paying attention to little things because to them those do not seem to carry any value. Their own ignorance has lead to an ending where the protagonist will be free. The women usually experience the same things so they will fight for other women, for "she is disturbed now and looks fearfully as she enters. The women come in slowly and stand together near the door" (1). Alkalay-Gut also comes to the same conclusion, that "women are not afraid and conspiratory, but clearly sure in their justice" (9).

2. Kate Chopin's *The Awakening*

2.1. The Life of the Author

Kate Chopin was born Kate O'Flaherty, in St. Louis, Missouri, on February 8, 1850. Kate's family on her mother's side was of French descent, so she grew up speaking both French and English.

In 1870, Kate married Oscar Chopin of Nachitoches Parish, Louisiana, and like many wealthy families, she often went by boat to vacation on Grand Isle, a Creole resort in the Gulf of Mexico. Between 1871 and 1879 Kate Chopin gave birth to five sons and a daughter.

After becoming a widow at age thirty two, influenced by Guy de Maupassant, Chopin began to compose fiction. In 1890 her first novel, *At Fault*, was published. After failing to find a publisher for her second novel, *Young Dr. Grosse and Theo*, she destroyed the manuscript. *Bayou Folk* (1894), a collection of twenty three stories written up in *New York Times* and the *Atlantic*, was published by Houghton Mifflin Company. Her collection of twenty one stories, *A Night in Acadie* (1897), modern critics consider one of the America's great nineteenth century books of short stories.

In 1904 Chopin complained to the doctors of a pain in her head who believed that she had had cerebral hemorrhage. She lapsed into unconsciousness the next day, and died on August 22. (*KateChopin.org*)

2.2. About *The Awakening*

*The Awakenin*g is a novel by Kate Chopin published in 1899. The title of the novel refers to the main character's awakening to sexual passion and to a knowledge of her own deeper self. The critics considered the novel much too bold and morbid for that time, even though a few critics praised the novel's artistry. What makes the novel complete is the "finesse with which the author presents the psychological development of Mrs. Pontellier and the force and sustained power with which she reveals that development" (*American Literature: The Makers and the Making* 1706).

2.3. The Awakening of "the New Woman" in *The Awakening*

From the first chapters of the novel it is obvious that the protagonist of the novel Edna Pontellier will go through some big changes in her life. Edna is married to a wealthy French Creole from New Orleans, Léonce Pontellier. The somewhat unusual relationship between the two becomes more pronounced when Léonce criticizes his wife for getting sunburned after having swum during the hottest hours of the day, "looking at his wife as one looks at a valuable

piece of personal property which has suffered some damage" (4). If it is to assess the time the novel was published, the reader can conclude that Léonce's perception of his wife as a "property" was common in the nineteenth century society. Edna, for example, fights the domesticity and that which the novel terms as "mother-woman" whose job is to idolize her children and worship her husband. That kind of life was trust on a woman by the conventional marriage.

In addition, waking Edna in the middle of the night, Léonce scolds her for her "habitual neglect of her children" (12). Unlike the other women in the novel, most of whom present the *ideology of "mother-woman"*[1], Edna does not idolize her children and worship her husband at the cost of her individuality. On the other hand, her friend Adèle Ratignolle, is an example of the perfect "mother-woman" accepted by the Creole society. Even though Edna has spent a great deal of time around Creole women, she still has some reservations toward their customs. She cannot understand the openness of Creole women openly discussing the intimacy of pregnancy and love affairs. A strict code of chastity is imposed upon them, giving no need for a Creole man to experience jealousy because their women are taught from the birth that a man's possession of his wife will never be challenged. Critic Rosemary F. Franklin describes them as having "their relations among themselves [are] emotionally intense; those with their husbands are unquestioning and submissive" (513). This type of ideology described in the novel can be compared to the *courtly love ideal*[2] of the medieval poetry where the relationship between the woman and the man was entirely chaste. The cultural ideal was that a man devotes his actions and love towards a woman as an ideal figure. The medieval knight had to have such primary virtues as courage, humility, honor and courtesy toward women. Courtly love was practiced by noble lords and ladies, and because the ladies were married, the lovers were to keep the relationships a secret. (*DePaul*) Edna recognizes this medieval ideal in the interactions of Robert Lebrun with her and other women.

However, Edna slowly begins to awaken and falls in love with Robert Lebrun, a man who every summer devotes his attention to one woman there in Grand Isle summer holiday resort. Edna is not sure why she refused to with Robert to the beach and swim. Even contemplating it, Edna slowly begins to think of herself as an individual in contrast to the world. A big step in the emotional and psychological awakening of the main character can be also seen in the way she develops under the influence of Adèle Ratignolle and the Creole society. The reticence Edna has always felt being around the Creole women, starts to subdue with her close friendship with

[1] My italics.
[2] My italics.

Adèle. Opposite to Adèle, Edna has never learned how to express herself. Barbara Hochman argues that "despite increasing self-awareness as the novel unfolds, Edna's attempts at expression are never understood by others." (213) Gradually Edna opens herself up and evolves into a different person from the one that used to walk through a meadow near her home as a child, spreading out arms as if swimming through the grass. The motif of Edna spreading her arms actually reminds the reader of a bird taking her first flight and leaving its paternal nest. Edna herself notes that "sometimes I feel this summer as if I were walking through the green meadow again; idly, aimlessly, unthinking and unguided." (43)

Edna is certain that "her marriage to Léonce Pontellier was purely an accident, in this respect resembling many other marriages which masquerade as the decrees of Fate" (46) so she later felt a certain satisfaction in her marriage's lack of passion and excitement. "As a devoted wife of a man" (47) Edna believed that matrimony would anchor her to the standards of the society. Thinking about her past and her current marriage to Léonce, Edna starts evaluating herself in terms of motherhood. "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." (47) She finds out that she has assumed the responsibilities that were not meant for her and that she feels relief when her children are sent away from her. As the novel continues, her children will bring about a crucial decision from Edna, causing her to ultimately end her own life.

An important element of Edna's awakening is her meeting Mademoiselle Reisz, a middle-aged piano woman. Mademoiselle Reisz's playing moves Edna to the verge of tears testifying the scope of her drawing self-discovery. Mademoiselle exemplifies the artistic woman, a woman expected to use art to be socially entertaining. In contrast, Edna will later find her own art in painting, to be the satisfaction solely for her. Carole Stone, when talking about the female types in *The Awakening*, says that Mademoiselle Reisz exemplifies the solitary life of a dedicated artist, while Adèle embodies female biology. Adèle's most important merit is most surely her persuasion of Edna to talk about her emotions, but she also "awakes Edna to the sensuality of her own body" (24-25). Adèle encourages her to express thoughts and feelings by talking about different subjects. When Edna tells Adèle the story of her childhood, the memories of walking through a meadow near home, Adèle strokes her hand and shows her warmth and care.

In a way, the most important and crucial fact for Edna's awakening is the night of her first swim in the sea. Despite the fact that others have tried to teach her how to swim she was still unable to. Edna's first swim symbolizes the most important step in her transformation – her sexual awakening and her self-discovery. "But the night sat lightly upon the sea and the land.

There was no weight of darkness; there were no shadows. The white light of the moon had fallen upon the world like the mystery and the softness of sleep" (69). Feeling empowered by water, Edna decides to swim out alone, and for the first time, she truly gains a sense of control over anything in her life. Edna's first swim also brings her about the courage to, for the first time in six years, stand up to her husband refusing to go to bed choosing to stay outside at the hammock: "she could not at that moment have done other than denied and resisted. (…) But she could not have realized why or how she should have yielded, feeling as she did then" (79-80). She has always submitted to her husband's requests without question or remark, and cannot grasp the idea that she has yielded to his commands before.

Another important step of Edna's awakening is the moment she requests Robert's company and they leave for Chênière Caminada for the day. Edna finally feels as though the chains that had held her to Grand Isle have finally snapped over the course of her night in the hammock, leaving her unchained and free to drift wherever she chooses. At Chênière Caminada she "feels sufficiently relaxed to shed social constraints and express herself more freely." (Clark 338) She finally recognizes the transformation she has undergone in such a short time. Still, it seems as if Edna's transformation has gone off overnight, ""How many years have I slept?" she inquired. "The whole island seems changed." (96) The island, and Madame Antoine's cottage, present for Edna freedom that comes out of years and years of self-isolation within a conventional society. The conventions of the society are presented by the relationship between Edna and her husband. In other words, when the exhausted Edna goes to bed, Léonce's authority is restored. His comment that he will go to bed only after he finishes his cigar, makes it clear that he can dictate his own actions, whereas Edna cannot. Just as the child has to listen to his or her parents, Edna has to accept her husband's authority.

Having Robert leave for Mexico, Edna feels as though her entire existence has been dulled by his absence. A few weeks after Robert's departure and Pontellier's return to New Orleans, Edna, angered by Léonce's constant criticism, tries to unsuccessfully crush her wedding ring with a vase. Edna's rebellion continues through her refusal to stay at home attending to Léonce's Tuesday business relations, but occupies her time with painting rather than the domestic chores of which her husband admonishes when mentioning Adèle Ratignolle as obviously the perfect wife of a Creole husband. Rather, he is more worried about the negative effects Edna's behavior could leave on his social upstanding than about her happiness. Even though it is rather obvious that Edna represents a type of a "radical feminist", Kathleen M. Streater, states that "Chopin, through Adèle, offers her readers more than one definition of feminist expression." (406) Adèle is introduced as "mother-woman" ideal, but Adèle's resistance

comes from her submissiveness because she is the character to tell the story of a typical woman of the time. When needed, Adèle plays the perfect hostess while by abiding by the rules of society, she also enables her friend's transformation.

Soon, Léonce expresses his concern about Edna's behavior to Doctor Mandelet, his friend and family physician, whom Rosemary F. Franklin in her article "The Awakening and *the Failure of Psyche*" refers to as "a type of the objective observer" (522). Léonce explains to the Doctor that "I [he] don't know what ails her" (169) because "she's got some sort of notion in her head concerning the eternal rights of women" (170). The doctor asks then if she has been associating of late with a circle of pseudo-intellectual women" (171), alluding to the suffragist and feminist movements of the time. In order to study Edna's behavior, Doctor Mandelet attends a dinner at Pontellier home, and listens to Edna's story of a woman who disappears forever into the islands with her lover. Although Edna alludes that she has heard the story from Madame Antoine, the doctor is the only person who perceives the implications of the narration. He concludes that the story is actually about Edna, and on his way home, he even mutters to himself: "I hope to heaven it isn't Alcée Arobin" (184). Léonce's not understanding the real context of the story is just one more evidence to Edna's comment to Adèle that Edna and her husband "wouldn't have anything to say to each other" (179).

Finding weddings "one of the most lamentable spectacles on earth" (172), Edna refuses to attend her sister's wedding ceremony and engages into argument with her father. Edna's father, a former Colonel in the Confederate army, then criticizes Léonce's lack of control over Edna, claiming that a man must use authority and coercion in all matters concerning his wife. This scene just further encourages the reader to sympathize with Edna and to learn to understand her point of view of the time when women were forbidden certain freedoms in marriage and basic human right for expression because it would not have been accepted by the society.

Similarily, Edna's attitude reveals her desire to engage with men on a more equal level than the degrading manner of Adèle's complete attention toward men. To fully separate one character from the other we see that (in chapter eighteen, during Edna's father's stay in New Orleans) Adèle's coquetry toward her guests is completely opposite to Edna who finds that kind of behavior distasteful. "The Ratignolles understood each other perfectly. If ever the fusion of two human beings into one has been accomplished on this sphere it was surely in their union" (144). However, Edna "recoils from their relentless domesticity" (Hochman 232). She thinks that her own marriage with Léonce cannot truly exist separate from the strict confines of Creole society.

At times, Edna is optimistic about her future and places her trust in the promise of youth. She visits her friends at Grand Isle and meets Alcée Arobin whom she starts to spend time with. Through her relationship with him, Edna starts to discover her sexual side: "she grew accustomed to him. They became intimate and friendly by imperceptible degrees, and then by leaps" (204). Alcée's boldness makes Edna nervous, and despite her attraction to Alcée, she feels that she is being led toward infidelity. Yet, it is not her husband, but Robert who she feels she has betrayed with Arobin. Moreover, Arobin's kiss is "the first of her life to which her nature had really responded. It was a flaming torch that kindled desire" (218). Because Alcée evoke the sexual desire in Edna, it is a little ironic that after expressing her love for Robert to Mademoiselle Reisz she gives herself to that man. It is even more ironic that when Robert returns to New Orleans, she does not stop her encounters with Alcée. Edna's verbal admission of love to Mademoiselle Reisz gives her the strength to pursue the passion in love. Alcée presents an outlet for Edna's animalism. Therefore, Rosemary F. Franklin concludes that the episodes with Alcée present Edna's greatest challenge: "to understand that romantic love is born of erotic longing within oneself for transcendence that cannot be fulfilled by union with another human being" (523). Her rebellion involves the need to satisfy both her physical desire, which she finds with Alcée, and her artistic desire brought upon her by Mademoiselle Reisz' music.

Edna continues to visit Mademoiselle Reisz, who is helpful at the time of emotional turmoil. Edna admits that she wants to move into a smaller house because it will enable her to be independent and free. Moreover, neither Mademoiselle Reisz nor Edna herself can explain the deeper reason for her sudden decision. Mademoiselle gives Edna an advice that has the power to change a person's life, "the bird that would soar above the level plain of tradition and prejudice must have strong wings" or else it will be "bruised, exhausted, fluttering back to earth." (217). As Clark contends, "this metaphor of the caged bird partly alludes to women's entrapment in marriage or remarriage, a social constraint which Edna Pontellier is forced to confront after her awakening" (336). Like in *Trifles, The Awakening* too relies on "bird symbolism". Throughout the novel Edna is metaphorically associated to a bird, but it is also an obvious foreshadowing of Edna's death as the image of a bird with broken wings returns just before Edna's suicide.

Preparing to move to her new home, "pigeon house", Edna packs only the possessions that her husband did not buy to her. She refuses to be treated or behave as a cultural stereotype. Her move allows her to move away from her husband's possessive hold over her and the material possessions are the reminder of his ownership of her. While the house does provide Edna with independence and isolation, allowing her to progress in her sexual awakening and to throw off Léonce's authority, Edna will soon find out that it offers less liberty than it seemed to

promise. Edna confines herself within a new sort of cage due to Robert's concession to marriage as a social convention which does keep Edna still trapped. Robert wants to marry Edna, but she cannot even contemplate the idea to again live by an accepted convention of the society. Edna claims that she has not endured confinement of her marriage to Léonce, only to allow the same to happen with Robert.

Robert is much nearer at hand than he has been for the past months, but she turns to Alcée for lustful satisfaction. In doing so, Edna is for the first time utterly honest with herself about her sexual needs. This is the irony of Edna as the character. She admits to herself that her affair with Alcee is the response to her anticipation of Robert's return, but also to the animalistic passions raging within her.

Only when Edna and Robert finally speak honestly of their feelings for one another does Edna begin to undergo the tragic, final revelation of her awakening. According to Clark, "Edna handles her encounter with Robert very well because by then she has recovered possession of her own body and voice" (344). During Edna's conversation with Robert at pigeon house, he confesses that his trip to Mexico was an attempt to escape his love for her because "I couldn't help loving you if you were ten times his wife; but so long as I went away from you and kept away I could help telling you so" (280) until Léonce would set her free. Yet, Edna replies to Robert: "You have been a very, very foolish boy (…) I am no longer one of Mr. Pontellier's possessions to dispose of or not. I give myself where I choose. If he were to say, 'Here, Robert, take her and be happy; she is yours,' I should laugh at you both" (282). She also now realizes that to run to Robert, also means to run straight into the arms of the male-female dynamic power that she has experienced with Léonce. However, Robert does not want a conventional affair, nor does he want to be just another step in a purely selfish quest for independence. When even Robert, whose love matches the sincerity and desperation of her own, refuses to trespass the boundaries of societal convention, Edna acknowledges the profundity of her solitude.

Edna realizes that she is still trapped, "shackled" by the society and its expectations. What provides these shackles are actually her boys, "it makes no difference to me, it doesn't matter about Leonce Pontellier – but Raoul and Etienne!" (299). They make her feel "overpowered" (300). She imagines that by virtue of their very weakness, their vulnerability, they seek "to drag her into the soul's slavery for the rest of her days" (300). Edna's suicide affirms the claim she has made to Adèle that for the sake of her children she would sacrifice her life but not herself. By killing herself, she avoids returning to her miserable marriage to Léonce for the sake of her children because it presents the betrayal of the essence of her own being, but

this way she preserves her children's reputation and how they would be treated were she to run away somewhere and live alone.

As she walks toward the sea Edna's thoughts are jumbled, but once she reaches the water, she removes her garment. For the first time in her life, Edna stands "naked in the open air, at the mercy of the sun, the breeze that beat upon her, and the waves that invited her. (…) She felt like some new-born creature, opening its eyes in a familiar world that it had never known" (301). While swimming, she muses that nobody ever understood her, perhaps Doctor Mandelet would have, but now it is too late. In the end, she is overtaken by exhaustion.

To agree with Streater, Edna chooses suicide rather than a life confided to the expectations of the society, which provokes passionate responses in the readers (411-413). Her suicide can be seen as a part of her rebellion because she ensures that her final act is a self-determined one. Chopin introduces Edna as a woman who gradually discovers her own power and identity and fights against the constrictions of society she is not content with. In that way Edna successfully pursues her freedom from the life that has been thrust on her. Moreover, Edna did not become "the bird that would soar freely above the level of tradition and prejudice" (206) because by committing suicide she did not spread the strong wings that can conquer the convention. "Nevertheless," as Stone concludes, "Edna Pontellier succeeds in giving birth to a new self even though the fact that she can not live on earth as this new self is tragic" (31).

3. Virginia Woolf's A Room of One's Own

3.1. The Life of the Author

Virginia Woolf is one of the highly respected English authors, essayists and writers of short stories, regarded as a modernist literary figure of the twentieth century.

She was born Adeline Virginia Stephen in 1882 into a prominent family. Even though her education was limited, Virginia grew up reading avidly from her father's library. Her youth was a traumatic one, with the early deaths of her mother and brother, next to the history of sexual abuse, about which Woolf writes in her autobiographical essays "A Sketch of the Past" and "22 Hyde Park Gate", and the beginnings of a depressive mental illness that caused her to be institutionalized after her father's death in 1904. All of this led her to eventually commit suicide in 1941.

Virginia Woolf's most important texts include novels, such as *The Voyage Out* (1915), *Jacob's Room* (1922), *Mrs. Dalloway* (1925), *To the Lighthouse* (1927), and *The Waves* (1931). She also wrote collections of short stories, non-fiction books, and biographies.

An important facet of Virginia Woolf's life are her lectures, delivered in October 1928 at Newnham College and Girton College, on the topic of Women and Fiction, which were expanded and revised into *A Room of One's Own*, printed in 1929. (*Virginia Woolf Society of Great Britain*)

3.2. About *A Room of One's Own*

A Room of One's Own is a 1929 essay, essentially a revision of Woolf's speeches on the topic of Women and Fiction. The essay is an important work of feminist literary criticism, in which Woolf brings about the thesis that a woman, to be able to write fiction, must have money and a room of her own.

3.3. The Awakening of "the New Woman" in *A Room of One's Own*

Virginia Woolf starts her essay as a kind of speech explaining to her readers and listeners that she will speak about Women and Fiction. She says it may refer to women and what they are like, to women and what they write about, or it may even mean the fiction that was written about the women. She explains that she only offers an opinion, "a woman must have money and a room of one's own if she is to write fiction" (Chapter 1, Paragraph 1)[3], but does not come to a conclusion since the subject of her lecture is so complicated, so as far as she is concerned, the

[3] *A Room of One's Own*. Virginia Woolf. All quotation from the text is indicated by chapter and paragraph.

subject remains unsolved. "'I' is only a convenient term for somebody who has no real being" (Chapter 1, Paragraph 1), says Woolf, so it is to be assumed that the main character through which Woolf will speak is an imaginary narrator, and in doing so, "fiction and its lies are incorporated in the lecture's methodology and the conversational, informal freedom to challenge her views is worked in" (Gan 78).

The first person narrator, "I (call me Mary Beton, Mary Seton, Mary Carmichael, or by any name you please, it is not a matter of any importance)" (Chapter 1, Paragraph 2), sitting on a bank of a river, compares her thoughts on the subject to the moving fish just fished out of water. Then she walks across the grass, but is stopped by a Beadle, and the narrator concludes that he was angry because she was a woman and should not have been walking on the grass. This is the first matter that shows the great inequality that existed between men and women of the nineteenth century, because men would be allowed to walk across the grass.

The narrator remembers an essay by Charles Lamb about one of Milton's poems (she thinks it was *Lycidas*), so she goes into the Oxbridge library, where she is not allowed to enter because "ladies are only admitted to the library if accompanied by a Fellow of the College or furnished with a letter of introduction" (Chapter 1, Paragraph 4). Once again, we can see that some places were forbidden for women to enter, which is highly unaccepted and unusual in today's twenty first century society. Yet, using this as an example is useful because it helps the women as a whole not to allow men to ever suppress them again. Patricia Moran explicitly argues that the "key among the difficulties facing women (…) is men's public disparagement and denigration of women's efforts. The fear of ridicule and censure is a very real, albeit psychological impediment that does not obstruct men" (481).

Leaving the library, the narrator passes the church, but does not go inside because, even if she was allowed to, she does not want to, but also because maybe the verger would have stopped her asking for a baptismal certificate or such. This causes the reader to laugh with the narrator because she comes to an early conclusion without the real evidence of the fact, because she does not enter the church, or because the narrator wants to break the tension of what has already been seen from the behavior of the Beadle toward her as a woman.

After the luncheon party, through which the narrator reads the verses of Tennyson and Christina Rossetti, the narrator concludes that the poetry before her time "celebrates some feeling that one used to have" (Chapter 1, Paragraph 10), while the poets of her time express the real feelings they have at the moment of writing. Objectively, this is what writing should be about, the thoughts and ideas that pass through our head in the very moment of writing.

As the afternoon passes, and the dinner is over, the narrator thinks of all the women working together through the years, and still finding difficulty to earn two thousand pounds together. Again, we can relate to the twenty first century society, where women are still underestimated in their work and earn less money than the men, but are equally, or sometimes even more, competent for the job, than the men. It is hard to imagine what it must have been like for women of Woolf's time to survive in the world ruled by men, especially since, as the narrator explains it, even if the women had been able to earn a good salary, they would not have been able to keep it because "the law denied them the right to possess what money they earned" (Chapter 1, Paragraph 14) and it would have been considered to be the husband's property. The chapter ends with Woolf's thought that the tradition must have a great effect on the writer.

The chapter two brings Woolf's narrator to London and the British Museum where the narrator learns that gender, a woman in particular, has attracted a lot of attention from men, whether they were biologists or doctors, essayists, novelists, or even the men who had no apparent qualification except that they were not women. On the other hand, the narrator welcomes the fact that women have not written about men, and feels flattered to be the subject of such attention in writing. However, the narrator concludes it to be a waste of time to read what men have written about women, because from the points they have taken as important, less body hair or such nonsense, it is impossible to say anything about the women's psychology. The narrator makes a sketch of one of professors that has written about women, and "whatever the reason, the professor was made to look very angry and very ugly in my sketch, as he wrote his great book upon the mental, moral and physical inferiority of women" (Chapter 2, Paragraph 5). The narrator here approaches the problem subjectively because that was probably the way the professor has written.

Leaving the research, and later, leafing through a newspaper, the narrator concludes that the society of her time has been ruled by patriarchy, and yet, the professor that wrote about women's inferiority is still angry. On the other hand "writing *A Room of One's Own* would prove to have a salutary effect on her [on Woolf], freeing her critical voice" (Moran 483). Yet, it is sad to say that the society of twenty first century, even if it has changed quite a lot in the last century, is still mostly patriarchal, and men indeed rule this world, which only makes it hard for women to survive, and their fight to gain their own freedom to be considered completely equal to men is still strong. "Life for both sexes — and I looked at them, shouldering their way along the pavement — is arduous, difficult, a perpetual struggle" (Chapter 2, Paragraph 6).

In chapter two we find the new identity of the narrator, it is Mary Beton, when she remembers that her aunt has left her a legacy of five pounds a year for ever, "for no other reason

than that I [the narrator] share her name" (Chapter 2, Paragraph 7). It was about the same time that women were given the right to vote. What is important is that this legacy has left her with a way to be secure for the rest of her life, it "unveiled the sky to me" (Chapter 2, Paragraph 8), and enabled her not to have to depend on anyone but herself, least of all, a man. This proves the whole point of Woolf's essay that a woman needs to have her own income and place to be able to thrive in writing as she wishes to do.

The narrator wonders how it can be that men have written so much during history and women almost nothing. "Women's "absence" from the Renaissance", says Moran in her article, originates maybe from the "claims of sexologists that women writers were biologically incapable of developing varied styles or disciplined structures" (489). An example of such is the Elizabethan era; Shakespeare has left so much in writing to the world. In Professor Trevelyan's *History of England*, the narrator reads the difficulties the women in England went through in the fifteenth century which is the time of Chaucer, and later on at the time of Stuarts. It was the norm for women of that time to participate in arranged marriages, to be beaten and hurt over sometimes completely trivial things by their parents, and later on their husbands. This reminds a little of the way Leonce Pontellier treats his wife, Edna, trying to make her feel inferior, at the beginning of Kate Chopin's novel *The Awakening*, as if she were no more than a possession he has worry about. Also, "this woman is fiction", says Woolf, "she was locked out, beaten and flung about the room" (Chapter 3, Paragraph 3). Physically or emotionally, women were used to being considered inferior. The same has happened to a lot of female characters in fiction that was written by men, and we can only wonder that if patriarchal society treats a woman in such a way in fiction, how can she find the strength to survive in the real life.

Before eighteenth century, notes Woolf, nothing was known about women. This answers to the question why women did not write literature. There was almost nothing known about them, their personal lives and their education, or as Woolf says, "what, in short, they did from eight in the morning till eight at night" (Chapter 3, Paragraph 6). This causes the narrator to tell a story of Judith, Shakespeare's imaginative sister, concluding that it would not have been possible for a woman to write Shakespeare's plays. Woolf's "account of Judith Shakespeare problematizes the common sexological use of Shakespeare to 'prove' women's inferior creativity" (Moran 478). The narrator says that her life would have been completely different than that of Shakespeare at that time, solely because she was a woman. She would not have been allowed to go to grammar school, or study Latin, like Shakespeare, nor would she have been allowed to read much. Perhaps she would have written something, but she would have hidden what she wrote, or set it on fire. If she would have refused to marry the man that was most likely

chosen for her since her birth, maybe she would have run away. She would have been refused into theatre, unlike her brother who was always welcome there, and if a man took pity of her, she would have probably become with a child, but her life would most surely end in suicide. The narrator comes to a conclusion that no woman of Shakespeare's time would have had the genius of Shakespeare because the society would have just not accepted her, and she would end like the imaginary Judith did: "had she survived, whatever she had written would have been twisted and deformed, issuing from a strained and morbid imagination. And undoubtedly," says Woolf, "her work would have gone unsigned" (Chapter 3, Paragraph 9).

Woolf's depicture of Judith shows the difficulties the women of Elizabethan time would have gone through, and the expectations of society of that time. Today, there are still such cultures, such as those of Muslim religion, that have very set back views of chastity. Those can only lead a woman to insanity and unhappiness, because not even the strongest mind can survive being refused their own freedom. Even Wendy Gan in her article claims that "they [Victorian middle-class women] have no time of their own to study and develop their intellect nor can they pursue a vocation for fear of neglecting their domestic duties" (70). Consequently the reader has to agree with Woolf, and say that writing modern literature would have been a product of great difficulty for a woman, but thankfully, in the last century, the view of society and literature has changed. It was not only for the material difficulty that there were no women writing literature, and that even in the nineteenth century, which was much more open-minded that the Elizabethan time, the society would still find it almost ridiculous for a woman to express her thoughts: "there was an enormous body of masculine opinion to the effect that nothing could be expected of women intellectually" (Chapter 3, Paragraph 13). "Although physicians and other authorities addressed the problem of female creativity," concludes Moran, "Darwin added scientific validation arguing that women with obvious artistic talent were believed to be 'women of the masculine gender'" (485).

In chapter four, the narrator looks into very poor history of women's writing. It was hard to find a woman who had written anything more than letters, because the women were probably convinced of the beliefs of the society that the woman who wrote anything "brought herself to believe that to write a book was to be ridiculous, even to show oneself distracted" (Chapter 4, Paragraph 5). The change in the history of women writing literature starts with Aphra Behn, says Woolf, a woman who proved that money can be earned by writing. Therefore, toward the end of the nineteenth century middle class women began to write, as opposed to the previous centuries where only women from rich families indulged in writing. Jane Austen, Charlotte and Emily Bronte, and George Eliot are examples of women writing great literature in the nineteenth

century. What these authors had in common was the fact that they did not have children, or "a room of one's own", but they wrote in the common sitting room with their family. This only shows how hard it must have been for them to write such great novels like *Pride and Prejudice* and *Wuthering Heights*. "Then, again," as Woolf says, "all the literary training that a woman had in the early nineteenth century was training in the observation of character, in the analysis of emotion" (Chapter 4, Paragraph 9).

Finally, Woolf touches the question of the gender of the novelist and its influence on the writing of the author. It is explained in the essay through the work of Charlotte Bronte on her novel, *Jane Eyre*, because there the vivid anger can be seen, the anger that has caused the existence of the novel. Yet, on the other hand, this anger clashes with the integrity of the novelist, which Virginia Woolf considers a very important part of the novelist's work. Equally important, anger is a very subjective emotion, and there is no place for it in the objective writing such as plays and novels. It only makes the literary text seem less plausible. Nevertheless, it is understandable that the feelings are included in writing because "it is obvious that the values of women differ very often from the values which have been made by the other sex; naturally, this is so. Yet it is the masculine values that prevail" (Chapter 4, Paragraph 16).

Everything that has been shown so far has finally led to the modern era of literature, most importantly, that of Virginia Woolf's time. No longer are only novels written, now there are books on many different subjects and many different genres of literature. Reading and criticism, assures Woolf, has given the women a greater range of themes, so the female authors "may be beginning to use writing as an art, not as a method of self-expression" (Chapter 5, Paragraph 1). Woolf's narrator picks the first novel by Mary Carmichael, *Life's Adventure*, to see what characteristics she inherits from the four great novelists before her. What is innovative about Carmichael's novel is the fact that she complicates relationships between female characters. In contrast, those before her only depicted women as jealous or angry at other women. This means that "so much has been left out, unattempted" (Chapter 5, Paragraph 5). Almost always women were described only in their relationships to men. That was the reason behind such beauty found in female characters, or otherwise, such horrendous hellish creatures. It is only in the nineteenth century that women in fiction have become more complicated. Even though women have been housebound all these centuries, they have started to create, but in a way that defers from men's. "And one must conclude," explains Woolf, "that it would be a thousand pities if it were hindered or wasted, for it was won by centuries of the most drastic discipline, and there is nothing to take its place" (Chapter 5, Paragraph 11).

If considering the fact that God has created a man and a woman to be his equal, then there should be no pointing out of the differences between the two genders. The world needs female authors to provide us with the experiences of women, to explain to us what complicated human beings women are. Throughout the history women were always secluded by men, even considered inferior compared to them, but the fact is that the society has started to change due to the changes in the minds of the individuals. Therefore, we have more and more female authors as the time passes.

Mary Carmichael would seem to be the author of integrity that is so important to Virginia Woolf: "fear and hatred were almost gone, or traces of them showed only in a slight exaggeration of the joy of freedom, a tendency to the caustic and satirical, rather than to the romantic, in her treatment of the other sex" (Chapter 5, Paragraph 16). Woolf concludes that for not having money, time, and a room of one's own, Carmichael did well on her first novel, and in a hundred years' time, if she had had five hundred pounds a year and a room, she would have succeeded in becoming a great poet on her own. Moreover, only will and lots of work can result in one young girl achieving her dreams.

In the last chapter of her essay, Woolf brings the mind into the focus of her exploration. The focus of the mind always changes, so it shows the world in different perspectives. It made the narrator happy to witness two people of different genders getting into a cab together. Also, it raised the question, "whether there are two genders in the mind corresponding to the two sexes in the body, and whether they also require to be united in order to get complete satisfaction and happiness" (Chapter 6, Paragraph 3). Writing and inspiration prove to have reflected on the author's mind since, on occasion, it can be completely objective, while sometimes there is just one train of thought for the author. A sentence should result in author providing with a great lot of other ideas. The mind that can really understand all sides of the story is a genius mind, one similar to Shakespeare. This Woolf claims "by going back to an older definition of genius, Coleridge's notion of the 'androgynous mind'" (Moran 493), which would explain the union of thought in writing, and the ability to write all aspects of the story. Also, Woolf suggests that if the male author does not have a spark of a woman and a suggestive power, then we can conclude that the female reader will not comprehend a thing of what is written. Woolf believes that the author must be some kind of mixture of both sexes to write good literature, because "it is fatal for a woman to lay the least stress on any grievance; to plead even with justice any cause; in any way to speak consciously as a woman" (Chapter 6, Paragraph 9).

Even if the whole chapter six seems to be the speech of Virginia Woolf, Woolf breaks off with the words that Mary Beton will not speak any longer so she could continue. She concludes

that all this talk about inferiority and differences exists in the world where there are sides, where one side is supposed to win over the other. The thing that matters the most is the wish that the author writes what he or she wants to write. Symbolically, says Woolf, “five hundred a year stands for the power to contemplate, that a lock on the door means the power to think for oneself” (Chapter 6, Paragraph 12).

The women were given freedom to vote in 1919, so no longer a thing can stop them from writing what is true to their heart and mind. It is almost essential that, if given the resources she needs, if a woman possesses the mind of a Shakespeare, she does step forward and embrace her vocation because her strength to expose herself in such writing will surely in the future benefit the women’s community as a whole. “As such, Woolf's desire for spatial privacy was expressed through demands for a more gender-neutral space – a room – hence allowing both opportunities for exclusion and inclusion, solitude and community” (Gan 69).

Conclusion

After reading the selected literary texts and the assorted criticism, it is only left to conclude that the main characters Minnie Foster of *Trifles* by Susan Glaspell, the narrator of *A Room of One's Own* by Virginia Woolf, and Edna Pontellier of *The Awakening* by Kate Chopin, have succeeded in achieving their goal as becoming the representants of a new feminist ideology.

The "New Woman", as Zoila Clark emphasizes throughout her article "The Bird that Came Out of the Cage" is considered to be competitive, sporty and emancipated, as well as beautiful. Her clothes were fashionable, and she started a fashion for skirts worn with embroidered blouses. This "New Woman" is confronted with the so-called "bird-look" of women, who were typical "mother-women", invisible, foreign, hidden, characters that could or could not be themselves because it was not accepted by the society in which they lived.

To conclude, the society of the last part of nineteenth century, and the first decades of the twentieth century was quite patriarchal. Sometimes drastic measures were drawn, such as the suicide of Edna Pontellier or the crime of Minnie Foster. Nevertheless, women of that time have started the process of gaining their independence, but there is still left a lot to be said about problems women encounter in their lives. The description of the three main characters proves that the characters of Minnie Foster, Edna Pontellier and the narrator, are indeed the "New Women".

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Abstract

This paper discusses the development of female psyche in nineteenth century American literature. Three literary texts by prominent female authors were taken into consideration as a model for this research – the novel *The Awakening* (1899) written by Kate Chopin, *Trifles* (1916), a play in one act by Susan Glaspell, and *A Room of One's Own* (1929), an essay on feminist criticism by Virginia Woolf.

This paper is divided into three chapters, each discussing one particular author. Chapters start with a short information on the author and the literary text, and are followed by the critical analysis of the text.

Furthermore, these texts were used to help describe the development of major female characters under the influence of social circumstances of nineteenth century society. The society of that time was immensely patriarchal and distanced from new changes. Yet, that was also the time of the emergence of feminist ideology, whose sole aim is to establish equal political and economic rights for women.

Throughout history, even more so in the twentieth century, the feminist ideology has left a huge impact on women's society. The effect of feminism is strong and a lot can be said about the difficulties women encounter. The afore mentioned female authors are fine examples of female writing at a time when the society was very conservative so that female authors wrote little, if anything. They created characters that prove that women will fight the constrictions of society. Kate Chopin, Susan Glaspell and Virginia Woolf gave evidence of women who gradually discover their own power and identity.

Contents