

# The influence of societal ideals on women in the 19th and 20th centuries

[Literature](#), [American Literature](#)



The late nineteenth and early twentieth century was characterized as a time of growing change for women in terms of rights and freedom. As evidenced in "Editor's Note: Contexts of The Awakening," women's acceptance of traditional female roles began dissipating, and women sought to become vocal participants within society. However, many women continued to suffer under a highly patriarchal society, where the male was the dominant figurehead in the household. Women and men largely lived within separate spheres of society, with women expected to live their lives within the home, maintaining the well-being of their families. Kate Chopin's *The Awakening* and Charlotte Perkins Gilman's "The Yellow Wallpaper" present similar stories of the plight of women in an oppressive and misogynistic society. In both literary works, the respective female protagonists feel suffocated by the stifling expectations of society and rebel both consciously and subconsciously against the restrictive conventions of societal norms through rejecting the conventions associated with womanhood. Ultimately, both characters tragically liberate themselves from the societal bounds imposed on them by departure from the conscious world, via suicide in *The Awakening* and insanity in "The Yellow Wallpaper."

During the time of Kate Chopin's *The Awakening*, the limitations in role on many women prevented them from exploring their independence outside of the home. As seen in Louisiana, most married women were the legal property of their husbands, and "the Napoleonic code was still the basis of state law governing the marriage contract" (Editor's Note 119). Justice Bradley further asserts in *Bradwell vs. Illinois* that "The paramount destiny and mission of woman are to fulfill the noble and benign offices of wife and

mother. This is the law of the Creator” (WWL 77). His opinion is a direct testament to the universally accepted truth of the time- that women were to only take on roles within the domestic sphere of society. However, while societal expectations and conventions required a married woman to subvert her own needs to those of her husband and her children, protagonist Edna Pontellier is unwilling to suppress her personal desires for the benefit of her family, and instead chooses her own personal self-fulfillment and autonomy. As Edna begins “ 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 14), she defies the stereotypes of a subdued and devoted housewife, and rebels against the cultural demands of submissiveness that are expected of her. Her deviation from societal norms is evidenced in her choice to move out of the house she shares with her husband Leonce Pontellier into a smaller pigeon house of her choosing, as well as in her choice to openly pursue a sexual relationship with Alcee Arobin and a romantic relationship with Robert Lebrun. The culmination of Edna’s rebellion against society’s conventions occurs when she experiences her sexual awakening through Alcee Arobin. Edna’s initial interactions with Alcee bring her a sense of exhilaration and liberation, evidenced in her description of her kiss with Alcee as “ a flaming torch that kindled desire” (Chopin 80) that left her with “ an overwhelming feeling of irresponsibility” (Chopin 80). Later, by willingly choosing to continue pursuing Alcee’s sexual advances, Edna risks her reputation as a woman in society and is portrayed as a character with sexual desires, making her an equal counterpart to Alcee in their relationship. By having equal responsibility for the actions in her relationship

with Alcee, Edna is no longer seen as the weaker and submissive gender, and thus defies the set of rules prescribed by society for how a woman should behave.

The conflict between Edna's desires for independence financially, artistically, and socially and her lack of desire to meet the societal ideals that bind her to caring for her children is further exacerbated through the gender stereotypes imposed on her by the world she lives in. As Leonce Pontellier describes, "If it was not a mother's place to look after children, whose on earth is it?" (Chopin 7). Her husband's expectations of her, which run parallel to society's expectations of her, directly contribute to Edna's feelings of confinement and limitation. Edna is expected to place her family above all else and sacrifice herself to belong to her husband and her children, thus making her one who is meant to serve others. This notion is supported by Dorothea Dix, who proposes that "Chief and foremost among those [women's] oppressors are children. In her desire to be a good mother, and to do everything possible for her child's welfare, the average mother permits herself to be made a martyr before she realizes it" (WWL 149). Edna, however, is unwilling to make the sacrifices to her family that are expected of her, and instead chooses to pursue her own personal pleasures by moving into her own living quarters, taking up painting, and pursuing her own sexual relations. Regardless, the looming presence of societal pressures continue to haunt Edna. Despite experiencing joy and liberation following her interactions with Alcee, Edna is still faced with the fact that society forbids her from deriving true happiness from her sexual relations. As a married woman and a mother, Edna is first

and foremost bound to her husband and children. Additionally, Edna soon recognizes that although her sexual encounters may bring her happiness in the moment, they are ultimately tied to the permanent reality of motherhood, a sense of enslavement to the family. Edna realizes that she is incapable of living up to society's expectations of being a dutiful wife and mother due to their significantly constraining nature, and resolves that though her husband and her children were a part of her life, they "need not have thought that they could possess her, body and soul" (Chopin 109), and decides that "she would never sacrifice herself for her children (Chopin 108). Tragically, the only way that Edna feels that she can reconcile her true desire for an existence as an individual is through suicide.

A similar sense of female oppression is seen in the context of Charlotte Perkins Gilman's "The Yellow Wallpaper," where others, particularly the narrator's husband, fail to treat the female narrator as an individual in the Victorian era. In a world where the male is the dominant gender, the narrator is exceedingly patronized by her husband John, and her individual identity is suppressed through his actions. The narrator's passing remarks such as "John laughs at me, of course, but one expects that in marriage" (Gilman 1598) and "he is very careful and loving, and hardly lets me stir without special direction" (Gilman 1599) detail the suffocating nature of the narrator's relationship with her husband and reveal how the narrator blindly conforms to her husband's wishes. She later reveals that despite her love for writing, "He hates to have me write a word" (Gilman 1599). Through this revelation, it is clear that the narrator is trapped in a marriage that does not

allow her to have any freedom. The narrator's inability to express herself in a meaningful way eventually leads her to associate herself with the woman she sees in the wallpaper of her room who looks to be, like her, behind bars or in a cage. John further represses the narrator by forcing her to accept that her own thoughts and opinions do not represent reality, and that the only opinions truly deemed as "correct" are the ones expressed by the men who care for her.

John's use of words such as "little girl" (Gilman 1604) and "blessed little goose" (Gilman 1600) when referring to his wife evidence his condescending tone and attitude towards her. His use of infantile language when talking with the narrator further shows how he overrides the narrator's judgment on what treatment is best for her mental illness and how he deems her thoughts to be inferior to his own. His skewed opinions are felt by the narrator when she confides that "John does not know how much I really suffer. He knows that there is no reason to suffer, and that satisfies him" (Gilman 1599). In her confession, the narrator reveals how she feels that her emotions are utterly ignored and how she gets no say in any matters regardless of what she wants or how she feels. His unfair treatment leads the female protagonist to struggle to maintain her sanity and determine for herself what is real. She increasingly feels her powerlessness as she tries to repress her progressively troubling feelings, revealed through her growing certainty that there is something behind the wallpaper of the room she lives in. The narrator describes seeing a woman who is unable to climb through the pattern, a metaphor for her own life and the bindings that her husband has

placed on her which are too strong for her to fight. By conforming to and never directly fighting against the male opinion, the female protagonist ultimately succumbs to her own helplessness and departs the conscious world through being driven to insanity.

In both Kate Chopin's *The Awakening* and Charlotte Perkins Gilman's "The Yellow Wallpaper," female protagonists struggle with living under an oppressive environment created by social expectations. The highly patriarchal society stifles both women, though to a varying degree. While protagonist Edna Pontellier in *The Awakening* voluntarily chooses to break herself free from the shackles of societal ideals through suicide, the female narrator in "The Yellow Wallpaper" gradually succumbs to her debilitating mental condition unconsciously. Regardless of how the female protagonists choose to deal with their societal expectations, both ultimately end up resisting and freeing themselves from the chains of society through self-destruction. Through the actions of the female protagonists, both Chopin and Gilman demonstrate the tragic cost of patriarchy for women who cannot conform to the narrow, restrictive, and unrealistic conventions expected of them by the society they live in.