The Bird that Came out of the Cage: A Foucauldian Feminist Approach to Kate Chopin’s *The Awakening*

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Using Foucauldian principles, this study describes a complex process; the birth of a feminist woman. Through an exploration of the uses of bird imagery, it traces the development of Edna Pontellier, the protagonist of Kate Chopin’s 1899 novel *The Awakening*. It shows how she begins by gaining awareness of being caged by patriarchal restraints, goes through the various stages of self-reinvention, and finally escapes from a society that sought to confine her. Using a range of theoretical reference points, including Foucault’s analysis of the modernization of power, Marilyn Frye’s theory of oppression and the work of Sandra Lee Bartky on its internalization, this article analyzes the final drastic feminist resolution taken by Edna, the strong wife who ultimately belongs only to herself. This innovative analysis also reinforces the connection that exists between a woman’s awareness and control of her body in order to achieve liberation from patriarchal oppression.

Feminism as a recognized political movement came about when middle-class white women grew dissatisfied with their unfulfilled lives once they had access to progressive ideas through reading and traveling during the period of the Enlightenment, the industrial world, and the French revolution slogan of “liberty, equality and fraternity”. However, feminist dissent has always been present in different times and places. The oppression of upper-class white and Creole women in Louisiana as portrayed in Kate Chopin’s novel *The Awakening* (1899) is an example of how the main goal of Western feminism was to achieve liberty, disregarding equality and fraternity. For Harry Brod (1999, p. 504), the negation of equality and fraternity excluded women from full participation in society. I would argue that the first step of a dependent housewife towards liberation is to be in possession of her body and mind. Edna Pontellier, Chopin’s protagonist, achieves this individually, but it is fraternity which might bring equality and freedom for all. To this end, I examine avian vocabulary and imagery as it has been used in a variety of media until today in order to understand the protagonist’s escape from female stereotypes. Even though many critics have remarked upon
the use of Chopin’s bird imagery, this work introduces new theories to combine literary and cultural criticism. Using Marilyn Frye’s theory of oppression, I will discuss the systematic nature of oppression, its internalization according to Sandra Lee Bartky, and the modernization of power, as expounded by Foucault. Finally, I will analyze the drastic feminist resolution taken by the strong wife who belongs only to herself, as the New Woman who is born out of this text.

Many words related to birds are used to identify women. When Robert Baker (1999, p. 37) asks himself, “How are women conceived in our culture?”, he notes that the way we identify women reflects our conception of them, and that most terms used to identify women place them as non-human or as minors. Among the birds mentioned in his research are chick, canary, chicken, pigeon, dove, parakeet, and hummingbird.

With the exception of the hummingbird, which, like all the birds suggested, is generally thought to be diminutive and pretty, all of the birds are domesticated, usually as pets (which reminds one that “my pet” is an expression of endearment). None of the birds were predators or symbols of intelligence or nobility. (Baker 1999, p. 38)

Only Isabel Allende, a feminist Chilean writer, identifies a girl with a strong “eagle” in The City of the Beasts (2002).

In 1792, Mary Wollstonecraft published the first feminist manifesto, A Vindication of the Rights of Woman, using symbolic birds to refer to women’s oppression. According to Wollstonecraft (1967, p. 98), women are “confined then in cages like the feathered race, they have nothing to do but to plume themselves, and stalk with mock majesty from perch to perch”. 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. It is interesting that Marilyn Frye, a twentieth-century feminist philosopher, also compares the oppression of women to a caged bird, and her theory of oppression is based on this metaphor. In Kate Chopin’s The Awakening, avian vocabulary and imagery are used extensively, and these are an important tool for understanding women’s oppression and possible liberation.

Language and the Image of the Caged Bird as Systematic Oppression of Body and Mind

The novel opens with the image of a caged parrot and a mockingbird making lots of noise; notice, however, that the birds are separate and do not communicate:

A green and yellow parrot, which hung in a cage outside the door, kept repeating over and over: “Allez vous-en! Allez vous-en! Sapristi! That’s all right!” He could speak a little Spanish, and also a language which nobody understood, unless it was the mockingbird that hung on the other side of the door, whistling his fluty notes out upon the breeze with maddening persistence. (Chopin 2000, p. 22)
This is an image of isolation, confinement, and lack of communication. Edna experiences this in her marriage to a rich Creole husband, and so do other women who spend their summers with Madame Lebrun, the strong Creole woman who runs the cottages in Grande Isle and is the mother of Edna’s beloved Robert and Victor. Both Edna’s body and her mind remain inactive while she is living as a housewife in the private sphere of her home. In addition, like the parrot with language difficulties, Edna is unable to communicate with other women in Creole society because they keep whistling “fluty notes”, are distracted with their charms, and do not develop that language “nobody understood, unless [it is another caged bird]”. Edna’s longing to be heard finds a similar voice in Maya Angelou’s *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings* (1969), another book which seeks to raise consciousness about women’s oppression and silence at the hands of a patriarchal language that lacks the vocabulary to express women’s desires. It is interesting, though, that the parrot in Chopin’s novel says, “Go away! Go away! For heaven’s sake!”, if we translate from French to English. Is this caged bird song expressing an unconscious desire of Edna’s at this moment? Perhaps her yearning to communicate is mixed with a frustration at not being understood. She is “a solitary soul”, as the subtitle of the novel suggests.

The association of women with birds may owe its oppressive quality to the cages that immobilize them.

If you look very closely at just one wire in the cage, you cannot see the other wires. If your conception of what is before you is determined by this myopic focus, you could look at that one wire, up and down the length of it, and be unable to see why a bird would not just fly around the wire any time it wanted to go somewhere. (Frye 1983, p. 4)

This would seem to explain why married women like Adèle Ratignolle do not see the oppression which controls them. Like a caged bird, she does not see beyond her limits and is always in the same environment. Edna Pontellier, on the other hand, starts to take walks and distance herself from her surroundings. This freedom of body movement allows her to meet different people and to alert her senses to new experiences, such as swimming and being in solitary contact with nature to think about her life. In Frye’s words:

It is only when you step back, stop looking at the wires one by one, microscopically, and take a macroscopic view of the whole cage, that you can see why the bird does not go anywhere ... It is perfectly obvious that the bird is surrounded by a network of systematically related barriers, none of which would be the least hindrance to its flight, but which, by their relations to each other, are as confining as the solid walls of a dungeon. (Frye 1983, p. 5)

Edna then starts her own flight to freedom little by little when her body is in contact with water, and she achieves an awareness of physical pleasures and bodily control through swimming. This solitary awakening of the body, inaccurately labeled masturbation, is for Lacqueur (2003, p. 75) “embraced first by the women’s movement ... as a practice in the practice of freedom, autonomy, and rebellion against the status quo ... It was not reprehensible or frightening, but
liberating, benign and attractive”. It is as if Edna is reborn as a sexual and
independent person, like Botticelli’s Venus coming out of the sea. It is interesting
to note that “the voice of the sea speaks to the soul. The touch of the sea is
sensuous, enfolding the body in its soft, close embrace” (Chopin 2000, p. 35).
Contrary to traditional expectations, it is not a man who awakens her senses and
consciousness. Later on, she is left alone in a pension with Madame Lebrun, and
she talks to her Creole companion Robert Lebrun. Their conversations become
what Foucault (1984c, p. 20) would call “[sexual] discourse, … the meeting line
of the body and the soul” because it is through language that they experience
pleasure and desire. She also visits other women, like Mrs Ratignolle and Miss
Reisz, to try to communicate her ideas. We learn that unlike her contemporaries,
Edna’s “face was captivating by reason” (Chopin 2000, p. 25), and she analyzes
other women’s lives as well as her own. For instance, she does not want to be a
typical mother-woman like Mrs Ratignolle or an ostracized spinster like Miss
Reisz. She walks through the fields looking for strength and meaning in life. It is
during those promenades to the Chênière Caminada that Edna starts to create a
romantic illusion with Robert, and feels sufficiently relaxed to shed social
constraints and express herself more freely. This physical freedom provides a
welcome contrast to the “indescribable oppression” (Chopin 2000, p. 28) she
experiences with her husband, and it is in this spirit that she develops a strong
attachment to Robert. Her romantic affair empowers her so much that when
Robert leaves for Mexico, she decides to move from her house to a “pigeon
house” (Chopin 2000, p. 130) nearby without giving any notice to her husband.
From a distance, she sees her dungeon and never goes back to it after her fare-
well party. In other words, she needed to remove her body from her pigeon-hole
home in order to reflect upon her own situation. The control over her body makes
her aware of the relationship of body and space as an indicator of the kind of
oppression she is experiencing.

Edna then prepares to fly even further away. She leaves behind her two
children because she does not idolize them or wish to efface herself by worship-
ing her husband. Nor does she “grow wings as a ministering angel” (Chopin 2000,
p. 29) to protect others. The mother-woman is definitely Adèle Ratignolle, not
Edna. Her other friend, Miss Reisz, knows Edna is not the devoted homemaker,
but rather an independent artist. She even holds Edna’s back to see if her wings
are strong enough to enable her to fly. In fact, Edna’s arms will have gained
considerably in strength with her prowess at swimming, which serves as a prelude
to the kind of flight she will soon be able to make. She seems to run away from
her social role of mother and wife as her only functions in life.

Internalization of Oppression

Women like Mrs Ratignolle and Miss Reisz have internalized the way they have
been defined by society. The former is a Creole woman-mother and the latter a
white woman-spinster. As usual, it is the Creole or non-Western woman who is
portrayed as closest to nature and reproduction. Neither of them seems to have freely chosen her role. Instead, both women enact these two stereotypes because they bestow a sense of belonging and assurance of identity. Mrs Ratignolle is respected by society because she is dedicated to her husband and children, while Miss Reisz is recognized as an artist, which allows her to indulge in small eccentricities. In fact, the latter is accepted in social gatherings only to play music. Sandra M. Gilbert and Susan Gubar would identify Miss Reisz with the stereotype of the woman-monster because as an artist, she is considered abnormal for having a male skill: creativity. On the other hand, they would see Mrs Ratignolle as the woman-angel or eternal feminine, the stereotyped housewife “interpreting heaven’s luminous mysteries to her wondering husband” (Gilbert & Gubar 1984, p. 21). These stereotypes alienate women from creating their own identity. “Those mythic masks male artists have fastened over [the woman] to possess her more thoroughly” (Gilbert & Gubar 1984, p. 17) have molded her into a subordinate being as the ambivalent Other that is wanted as an angel and rejected as a monster.

Using Frantz Fanon’s research on the psychic alienation of black Americans, Sandra Lee Bartky (1990, p. 23) also agrees on three types of psychological oppression of women: “stereotyping, cultural domination, and sexual objectification”. Moreover, like colonized people, women internalize their oppression psychologically, and this forces them into subordinate roles. These types of oppression are subtle and work through fragmentation and mystification. For example, the person is split or fragmented into the stereotype of woman-angel (true) and woman-monster (false or abnormal) to then obscure the reality and the agencies of oppression in a systematic process of mystification, so that the stereotype is lived out as destiny, guilt, or neurosis (Bartky 1990, p. 23). Oppression works differently within women of different races and their interrelations. In the case of Miss Reisz, she is blamed for being independent and lives in isolation without any hope of fitting into her society. Even though she is less controlled than Mrs Ratignolle, she is made to entertain parties as the only way of being accepted in society. Instead of being admired for her courage to be an artist, she is punished for being different. In contrast, Mrs Ratignolle is loved by everyone and very much respected because of her motherhood. Women’s culture is inserted into patriarchy, so both women end up living out the sexist stereotypes as part of their identity. Patriarchy pits Western and non-Western concepts of women’s identities and interests against each other, which leads to the perpetuation of patriarchal power where some Western women get some privileges over their subordinate sisters. Since our civilization is patriarchal, women have no past to which they wish to return. Women can only create futuristic utopias of an alternative civilization, such the Herland 1979 [1915] described by Charlotte Perkins Gilman. When women are stereotyped by patriarchy, even their bodies are restrained and made to fit the stereotype of the real woman or woman-angel. In Chopin’s text, women’s dresses are described as the ones made in imitation of the British Victorian era (see Figure 1).
Let the eyes (being cast down, as this figure describes) discover the humility and respect, whilst bending not too much, but moderately, you make the curtsy properly; then rising from it gradually raise the eyes so too, and look with becoming modesty. (Nivelon 1999 [1737])

For Nivelon, "becoming modesty" for women was not incompatible with elaborate dress. As Foucault (1984b, p. 277) illustrates, it is the art of disciplining the body and behavior, which in turn creates docile bodies or what we recognize as civilized bodies.

As we can see, a woman like this is objectified not only because of her appearance as an upside-down flower or an hourglass clock, but also by having her eyelids lowered and not looking as a subject does. She becomes an object to be seen, just like present-day models do when being photographed to sell products. They are not persons anymore, but objects, because their bodies are fragmented — into a good bosom, a beautiful face, a tiny waist, or an angelic being. In this image, we see a modest woman who looks like a girl with an air of purity that denies her carnality and sexual desires. She also becomes a figure of adoration or abuse because of the passivity she exudes. Many of the paintings of women during these times are similar because there is even a stereotyped beauty that adapts to the values and fashion of each period in history. Not only were dresses uncomfortable because of the underskirt frame, which was one kind of birdcage, but also because of the corset that aimed for a created "perfection", as if women were born imperfect. Throughout the nineteenth century, dresses were tight at the waist; however, the loops started to run out of use and became worn only for special parties. The skirts remained long and dragged along the ground, collecting all sorts of rubbish, which made freedom
of movement almost impossible. Women’s body movements were, and still are, coerced by fashion and, as Iris Young argues, “restrictions on feminine body comportment generate a restricted spatiality in women as well, a sense that the body is positioned within invisible spatial barriers” (quoted in Bartky 1990, p. 35). Thus, Frye’s metaphor of the caged bird can also be understood as a system of psychological oppression that starts with physical molding.

In 1899, when *The Awakening* was first published, there was a new fashion for the new feminists that contrasted with the late Victorian style shown in Figure 1. The image was a cartoon character drawn by the American artist Charles Dana Gibson, which became known as “The Gibson Girl”. Between 1890 and 1910 he satirized society with his image of the “New Woman”, who was competitive, sporty and emancipated as well as beautiful. Her clothes were fashionable in both America and Britain, and started a fashion for skirts worn with embroidered blouses. Another Gibson look was a shirt collar worn with either a tie, a floppy artist bow, or a tie-neck cravat with a stick-pin bar brooch or crosscut ruffled jabot. This is a softening of the woman-monster that needed to be controlled and trapped in a new image: the personification of the feminine ideal.

The “bird look” used by women was, however, criticized by cartoonists such as Puck in 1877. His anti-corset caricature, “The Mode and the Martyrs” (see Steele 2005, p. 68), shows that women were practically parading around like geese to display the wealth of their husbands or trying to catch a husband. Fashion becomes then a problem of internalized oppression because women do not realize that the beauty gadgets are, as Puck puts it, implements of torture and symbols of death: women become "martyrs to fashion, or geese, running to their graves" (Steele 2005, p. 67). A woman’s beauty drawn by the patriarchal pen is another barrier that is not seen microscopically if one is in front of it; however, a cartoonist can see it when taking a macroscopic view of the whole system of oppression. Feminist reformers like Elizabeth Cady Stanton and Amelia Bloomer also observed the problem, but instead of finding the situation comical, they started to protest against the corset from the 1850s, and later created a new custom: bloomers. Nonetheless, corsets, the instruments used to reduce women’s bodies in width, as well as to inferiorize identity, are still in vogue, and maybe modern surgery does the job of the old-fashioned corset. Moreover, by reducing the waist, the hips and bottom become exaggerated, which, though perhaps appealing to men, reinforces gender stereotyping. On this note, we can recall the case of Sarah Bartman, a Khoi woman who was known as “The Hottentot Venus” in Europe in the early nineteenth century, because her body was objectified and displayed in freak shows for the pleasure men obtained from looking at her big hips and bottom.

Since when have women internalized the need to become objects and the product of male creation and continued to reinforce it through peer pressure? From the times of ancient Greece and Gaia, the goddess of the earth, woman has been seen as an “earth mother”. However, the sense of female empowerment gained by the association with the goddess became subverted and disenfranchised with the birth of patriarchy. According to Marx (1964), women started to
be seen as possessions with the birth of agriculture, when land was carved up into property and came under the control of male landowners. In this way, the earth mother became tamed, and from this point, civilization has seemed to trap women in stereotypes related to nature which are domesticated, like caged birds. Thus, it is no wonder that the positive feminine stereotype tries to evoke an idyllic image of a woman connected with a pure and ethereal goddess who is mother of humanity. The values attributed to women derive from unconditional love and sacrifice for their children. For this reason, Mrs Ratignolle, just before dying, uses her last breath to say to her best friend: "think of the children, Edna. Oh, think of the children! Remember them!" (Chopin 2000, p. 134). The assumed motherly instincts are always compared to those of animals, and if a mother does not put her children first, she is regarded as monstrous. An accusation that is particularly intimidating for women is, according to Frye (1983, p. 1), to be accused of insensitivity, even of bigotry, which would portray them as not real women, "since sensitivity is one of the few virtues that has been assigned to [them]". Therefore, both physical and psychological oppression makes women internalize male-created stereotypes, and for Foucault it is the physical oppression which affects them psychologically.

Foucault’s Analysis of the Modernization of Power

Foucault separates himself from the Marxist emphasis on the economy as the source of all evils and from state control or regulation as the liberal solution. He realizes that oppressive power does not come from above, but rather is exercised by everyone in different ways. Everyone has power, but when a person has internalized a dynamic of oppression, he or she is trapped in conflicting roles of subordinate and oppressor. The key problem, for Foucault, is the institutionalized system of oppression as an interlocking system of different forms of subjugation, of which the individual is a part. Since power does not operate from external forces over individuals, the best way to learn about the dynamics of power is by locating it in individuals. Thus, he is more interested in learning about how power circulates and shapes individuals of different genders, rather than finding the origins of power as a negative force that needs to be destroyed. Because of this, Foucault (1984a, p. 83) claims that "the body is the inscribed surface of events (traced by language and dissolved by ideas), the locus of a dissociated self (adopting the illusion of a substantial unity), and a volume in perpetual disintegration". The body is, then, the map of the different stereotypes an individual assumes as part of his/her identity; as a result, identity is just a social construct. In this way, we are all constantly shaping ourselves, so it is our right to define ourselves and modify how others frame us.

Who is responsible for women’s social construction? If Foucault had been asked this, maybe he would have explained it within the power/knowledge connection his theory is based on. Knowledge has a role in social and political control, and if it is patriarchal, women’s knowledge becomes an oppressive barrier too.
Women reinforce their own oppression because knowledge is biased. We all have something to do with it; consequently, we have the power to change it. Women have been espousing patriarchal ideas out of unintentional need and sometimes to their own advantage. For example, when the dynamic of disciplinary power appears during the Enlightenment as part of the modernization of society, women’s bodies are controlled to increase production in factories and this seems to be the natural trend of things. With Social Darwinism and a revival of Lamarkism, the belief in the improvement of inherited qualities, women’s health becomes an issue. Women’s bodies needed to be disciplined or adapted to fit bourgeois society based on the nuclear family. It seems that the family unit became the measure of success, as well as the center of production and reproduction of the new values for women. Thus, women’s education was focused on domesticity.

Many institutions, such as schools, mental asylums, hospitals, and prisons, started to discipline bodies into submission to the rule of societal norms. These were the places for undesirables until they learned to restrain their vicious appetites and undesirable pursuits. For Foucault, there is a politico-medical hold on a population hedged in by a whole series of prescriptions relating not only to disease but to general forms of existence and behavior (food, drink, sexuality and fecundity, clothing and layout of living space) … The doctor becomes the great advisor and expert, if not in the art of governing, at least in that of observing, correcting, and improving the social “body”. (Foucault 1984b, pp. 283–284)

This is something we appreciate in The Awakening when Edna Pontellier starts to free herself from her role of devoted wife. Mr Pontellier immediately calls the doctor to visit his wife when he sees she is not as submissive as she used to be. When he goes to see Dr Mandalet, he describes Edna’s symptoms in the following way: “She is odd, she is not herself … She has got some sort of notion in her head concerning the eternal rights of women” (Chopin 2000, p. 88). It is obvious that she is not sick. However, since the doctor has become the great advisor to discipline women’s bodies and minds, his intervention is seen as a necessity. Dr Mandalet shows concern about this patient and even asks seriously, “Nothing hereditary? ... Nothing peculiar about her family antecedents, is there?”, to which the husband exclaims, “On, no, indeed! She comes of sound old Presbyterian Kentuckey stock” (Chopin 2000, p. 88). This conversation reveals the importance of eugenics blended with nativism during the nineteenth century. According to Foucault (1984c, p. 148), there is a transition from eugenics to psychology, "from sanguinity to sexuality", which frees the sexual instinct because it is sexuality that is medicalized. Thus, the doctor finds feminist ideas are like an illness that can be inherited and requires treatment. Edna knows how patriarchy will diagnose her, so she confesses to a friend that her husband will think she is "demented" (Chopin 2000, p. 102) once he finds out she is leaving him.

The modernization of power is certainly pervasive. Edna needs to remove herself from her house before Dr Mandalet suggests her hospitalization. She is
relentlessly under surveillance by the inhabitants of her own house and even herself, because she always feels aware of her role as housewife in her home. For example, she forces herself to be in her cheerful mode in front of her guests, even though she is upset. This internal surveillance or internalized oppression is the result of the disciplinary practices she has learned about being a lady. For Bartky (1990), these practices that control the female figure, its gestures or behavior, movements, and cosmetics turn women into prisoners once they become their own *panopticon*. Being prisoners of their own desire to live the stereotype of the woman-mother or the woman-monster, they even police each other and become their own counselors when in danger of stepping out of their given identities. In the second section of this article, I have discussed how Mrs Ratignolle and Miss Reisz internalized their oppression and accepted it as normal. They seem to have chosen those roles, but that conception of liberty would be, for Foucault, an invention of the ruling classes. In fact, patriarchal power has created both domination and liberty.

**On Liberation**

If patriarchy permeates power and knowledge, can we say that Edna as a feminist is able to fly away from the systematic nature of internalized oppression perpetuated by the disciplinary policies of modernized power? In my view, her awakening to a feminist-raised consciousness was possible, but her suicide is proof that she was not willing to compromise the freedom she wished to enjoy. Consequently, her steps to freedom take her from delicate lady to radical feminist separatist, from which there is no exit. She realizes her affair with Arobin was part of her empowerment by leaving old sexual taboos behind, but it is her affair with Robert which affects her deeply. After developing her own self-esteem, being able to take walks on her own, putting on weight by eating as she pleases, getting rid of tight clothes and jewelry, forgetting her make-up, denying her husband access to her body, moving out to an independent little home, learning how to swim, being assertive, and all kinds of ways in which her body is liberated, she realizes that she has idealized Robert as different from other men. Her internalized romanticism of forming a perfect heterosexual couple is another invisible barrier she needs to remove. Edna manages to realize this, but she is not confident about avoiding the same path again. In fact, the last image that comes to her mind before dying brings an idyllic prince: “The spurs of the cavalry officer clanged as he walked across the porch. There was the hum of bees, and the musky odor of pinks filled the air” (Chopin 2000, p. 139).

Edna handles her encounter with Robert very well because by then she has recovered possession of her own body and voice. When he returns from Mexico and meets Edna by chance, he has become a conservative man like Mr Pontellier.

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1. Adrienne Rich (1980) considers that heterosexism is a political and patriarchal institution which holds that men have the right of access to women emotionally, sexually, and economically.
He proposes indirectly to Edna, saying: "I forgot everything but a wild dream of your some way becoming my wife" (Chopin 2000, p. 131). Edna answers:

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. (Chopin 2000, p. 131)

This shows that Edna is not a caged bird that can be passed on to another master, but a free bird that has taken a macroscopic view of her old cage or house, and is not willing to enter a similar one. At that moment she is required to visit Mrs Ratignolle, who is having her baby, so she leaves Robert behind and flies towards her friend. When she is back, Robert is gone, indicating that he is too conventional for her now. Even though Mrs Ratignolle is trapped in a stereotyped self, Edna’s solidarity with her Creole friend is a source of strength for her, and even provides proof that she is able to follow her new desires.

At this moment, aware that she cannot have the life she wants, Edna becomes the bird with the broken wing, spiraling down to the water. Edna inhabits a society which has not yet learned to tolerate a feminist woman or a fin-de-siècle New Woman. Unlike the doomed Icarus\(^2\), "she uses her strong, yet flawed, wings to remove herself from the world that cannot comprehend her" (Elz 2003, p. 14). She might be an early existentialist for finding freedom in death and seeing Hell in the emotional and socio-economic dependency to a male partner in her time. Edna will brook no compromise, for she does not want to be a hummingbird flitting from flower to flower in constant dependency like her lover Alcée Arobin, nor does she want to enter another cage with Robert. She understands she could give up what is unessential — her life — “but she would never sacrifice herself for her children” (Chopin 2000, p. 138). She enters the sea naked, "like some newborn creature" (Chopin 2000, p. 138), and the open ending leaves the reader to imagine her death either as liberation or as rebirth from the womb of the nurturing sea in a modern time. Her flight towards the unknown is not a punishment imposed on her by literary justice. Instead, Edna is a character who escapes from the control of her husband, her children, society, and even her author, since her feminist philosophy is to possess her body and mind. Considering this, we can understand her dissent when she says, "I give myself where I choose” (Chopin 2000, p. 131; my emphasis), stating her right to create her own identity and surpass any margins or barriers society imposes on her as a married woman.

Edna, as a New Woman, is a painter who wants to make her own design and be able to change it as she goes alone. She does not accept patriarchal stereotypes

\(^2\) There may be a classical allusion here: Icarus, the son of Daedalus, was so confident in his newfound freedom that he flew too high and near the sun with artificial wings. The heat melted the wax in the wings, and he fell to his death. This myth is often used as a metaphor suggesting that someone who dares to fly too close to the realm of the gods will suffer the consequences. However, Chopin seems to be replacing the fall of a young man with the rise of a woman by appropriating this myth of flying away.
that try to fix her into a determined essence, so she fights the physical and psychological oppression she has internalized to discipline herself. Her plan of action is to use the same system at the beginning, but later she realizes if she stays in her independent pigeon house, she would just be another outcast like Miss Reisz or Arobin. Edna takes, then, a radical position and, by removing her clothes, symbols of body discipline that affect her mind, she aims metaphorically to remove all the barriers that cage her. In so doing, Edna makes us aware of the systematic mechanisms of repression that are still present in the twenty-first century and need to be changed. Since *The Awakening*, feminism has evolved and now is more inclusive of all women’s voices. For instance, if Edna’s solidarity with other women had been stronger and they had been able to engage in dialog instead of feeling like birds in separate cages, they might have achieved more than they did operating on an individual basis. The lack of solidarity, as well as the presence of sexism, racism, and classicism, needed to be unlearned in those times and still needs to be even today. If that had been so, Edna might not have felt so alone in her feminist struggle as a wife and more than one character would have awakened to new beginnings in this story.

If we are to appropriate and change the metaphor of the caged bird, let us bear in mind that birds fly in flocks and not alone. The only way to break free from the internal barriers of oppression is by using the same systematic method of reinforcement created by the cages. In the same way we police ourselves and others to conform to patriarchal stereotypes, we should stand by each other to compliment our feminist actions, be supportive, and help others remove their different barriers once we have raised our consciousness and awakened others. In our individualistic world, we need to learn how to connect on a deeper level rather than just give the appearance of being in communication. We need to listen more and read other women’s needs by being aware of the life around us. Friendship among women should continue after marriage, so that women who are trapped in bad relationships can step out of them. Let us help each other visualize our oppression from different perspectives by taking a microscopic and a macroscopic view from different angles of the bird cage of our social structure. A change in perception could help us find new ways of fighting oppression. As bell hooks (1999, p. 487) says: "solidarity strengthens resistance". Thus, it is solidarity which can trigger action and make us free among each other, since freedom is an ongoing process.

References


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