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INTRODUCTION

The end of the 19th century is frequently denoted as the Fin de Siècle, indicating a time that observed significant cultural transformation. The United States witnessed an intricate combination of shifting ideologies, economic upheavals, and social changes during this time. These components converged in order to revive the American Dream, a vision that is distinctively American. The American Dream, which is deeply embedded in the identity of the country, has continuously stood for desire, ambition, and social progress.

Through the perspective of women's experiences, the literature of the Fin de Siècle, most notably Charlotte Perkins Gilman's *The Yellow Wallpaper* and Kate Chopin's *The Awakening*, exposes the intricate issues inherent in the concept of the American Dream. These writers tackle an examination of the complex connections between gender and autonomy within their perceptive narratives, offering a discerning evaluation of the prevailing societal conventions that determine and limit women's aspirations in their quest for the American Dream.

So, **the relevance of the research topic** lies in the critical examination of gender dynamics present in American literature during the late 19th century, with a specific emphasis on *The Awakening* and *The Yellow Wallpaper* and how these dynamics intersect with the evolving concept of the American Dream. These literary pieces establish parallels between present-day obstacles in achieving gender equality and the historical context of women's subjugation and inequity, reflecting on the complex nature of the American Dream.

Scholars have devoted considerable research and analysis to the representation of the American Dream in the Fin de Siècle literature. The theoretical basis for this examination was established by a prominent historian and author James Truslow Adams. He is widely recognized for his seminal work, *The Epic of America*, published in 1931, in which he introduced the term "American Dream" (Adams, 1931). Renowned scholars, including Harold Bloom (Bloom & Hobby, 2009), Jennifer Lucy Hochschild (Hochschild, 1995), Sarah Churchwell (Churchwell, 2019),

and Michael Kazin (Kazin, 2011), have made significant contributions to the comprehension of the cultural and literary aspects of the American Dream, thereby enriching the ongoing discourse on this subject matter. Scholars such as Eleanor Flexner (Flexner, 1996), Emily Machen (Machen, 2019) and Judith Butler (Butler, 1990) have offered critical insights on the American Dream, illuminating the issues of equality, identity and gender. Their contributions have established the concept as a subject of continuous and profound intellectual inquiry.

The objects of this research are the novel *The Awakening* by Kate Chopin and the short story *The Yellow Wallpaper* by Charlotte Perkins Gilman.

The subject of this research is the portrayal of the American Dream as it intersects with feminist ideologies in American literature during the Fin de Siècle period, specifically through the analysis of Kate Chopin's *The Awakening* and Charlotte Perkins Gilman's *The Yellow Wallpaper*.

The purpose of this Master's thesis is to examine how the American Dream is depicted and critiqued in Kate Chopin's *The Awakening* and Charlotte Perkins Gilman's *The Yellow Wallpaper* with an emphasis on analysing the gender roles and feminist criticism in the context of late 19th century American literature.

To achieve this purpose, we undertake the following **tasks**:

- to assess the impact of the Fin de Siècle era on the portrayal of gender roles and the American Dream in American literature.
- to research pre-Fin de Siècle and Fin de Siècle perceptions of the American Dream, particularly through the narratives of *The Awakening* and *The Yellow Wallpaper*.
- to examine the evolution of the American Dream during this period and its representation in the selected texts.
- to analyse the complex roles of female protagonists like Edna Pontellier, Mademoiselle Reisz, the unnamed narrator of *The Yellow Wallpaper* and Jennie in their respective quests for identity and freedom.

- to provide a feminist analysis of how the American Dream highlights gender inequality within the societal context of the Fin de Siècle.

In the course of the research the following **methods** were used: deconstruction, literary analysis, historical research, psychoanalysis, feminist criticism, narrative analysis, cultural studies, New Historicism, reception theory, biographical approach, close reading, comparative analysis and critical discourse analysis.

The topicality of this research lies in the detailed examination and critical analysis of how the American Dream is depicted in relation to women's roles and feminist perspectives in Fin de Siècle literature, particularly through Kate Chopin's *The Awakening* and Charlotte Perkins Gilman's *The Yellow Wallpaper*.

The practical value of this research is the potential to deepen our comprehension of the impact of the Fin de Siècle era on the American Dream and gender dynamics, facilitating a more sophisticated analysis of the historical background. This expanded viewpoint can contribute to a more thorough understanding of the American experience and its evolution by revealing contemporary debates about gender roles and societal aspirations.

The paper consists of the introduction, two chapters, conclusions to each chapter and general conclusions, the list of references (58 items), supplements and resume. The total amount of the Master Thesis is 99 pages.

CHAPTER 1. CONCEPTUALIZING THE AMERICAN DREAM: A THEORETICAL EXPLORATION IN FIN DE SIÈCLE LITERATURE

In this chapter, we will conduct a comprehensive examination of the representation of the American Dream in the Fin de Siècle American literature, with a focus on *The Awakening* and *The Yellow Wallpaper*. This analysis will commence by providing a definition of the Fin de Siècle period and its impact on American literary expression, then follow the evolution of the American Dream during this era. To provide a comprehensive overview, our study will look into the pre-Fin de Siècle conceptions of the American Dream. Subsequently, we will explore how the American Dream has changed within the context of this specific historical milieu. We will examine how prior conceptions of the Dream prepared the ground for its portrayal in these two works. Our analysis will focus on how these narratives reflect and critique the socio-cultural shifts that occurred during this time, thereby establishing a solid foundation for a comprehensive examination of gender dynamics and the concept of the American Dream.

1.1. Defining Fin de Siècle and its impact on American literature

The term “Fin de Siècle” has its origins in the French language and can be translated as “end of the century”. It applies to the historical epoch that took place in the late 19th century, covering the duration of approximately two decades from the 1880s to the early 1900s. This era, which marks the end of the 19th century and the beginning of the 20th, is frequently identified with significant changes in society and advances in creative innovation.

This era was characterized by a combination of pessimistic and optimistic sentiments, as societal disruptions and technological advancements resulted in both apprehension regarding the current state of affairs and anticipation for what lies

ahead. Within the realm of American literature, this particular era witnessed a notable shift from the romantic ideals prevalent in the early 19th century towards realism and naturalism. During this period, authors began to earnestly reflect and depict the intricate and paradoxical nature of their contemporary society. Prominent literary figures such as Mark Twain and Henry James explored themes of identity, morality and social structure, frequently offering critical perspectives on the American Dream and the realities of American society. The Fin de Siècle literature often questioned the conventional narratives of progress and success, reflecting a society in the midst of rapid change and a pervasive sense of unpredictability.

During the pre-Fin de Siècle period, the visual arts were significantly shaped by the concept of the American Dream, which was heavily influenced by the ideology of manifest destiny. This impact was particularly evident in the artistic depictions of the American West by the Hudson River School. Artists such as Thomas Cole and Albert Bierstadt depicted the landscape as a manifestation of propitious design and opportunity. In contrast, the advent of the Ashcan school, characterized by notable artists like Robert Henri and John Sloan, signified a turn towards the depiction of urban realism. Their artworks function as a visual critique of the American Dream since they are frequently infused with gritty and unadorned depictions of urban life. A wider social re-evaluation of the viability of the American Dream in the face of significant socioeconomic change can be seen in the aesthetic division between idealized landscapes and representations of urban realism.

In his scholarly publication titled *Popular Culture and Performance in the Victorian City*, Peter Bailey offers a comprehensive analysis of the Fin de Siècle era. He describes it as “a time of transition and anxiety, marked by a sense of decadence and finiteness as the 19th century neared its conclusion” (Bailey, 1998). Bailey highlights the prevalence of a profound interest in novelty, unfamiliarity and potentially disconcerting elements during the specified period. This fascination had a notable influence on the cultural and artistic manifestations of the era.

Also, he highlights the value of leisure experiences among the middle-class during the Fin de Siècle era, as well as the transition towards commercialization and the emergence of mass entertainment, as he writes “It is important that the middle classes not be left neglected in the growing research into the history of leisure in the nineteenth century, for they did much to determine the moral and ideological climate of its growth” (Bailey, 1998).

In literature, the Fin de Siècle period is renowned for its distinctive themes, including decadence, symbolism, and aestheticism. Authors of this era endeavoured to capture the intricacies and contradictions of a world undergoing swift and profound changes. Common motifs encompass moral ambiguity, the decay of traditional values and an extensive search for meaning. The prevailing fears and uncertainties that were deeply embedded in society at the time are attested to by this literary movement. In order to comprehend the impact of the Fin de Siècle on American literature, it is crucial to place this era in its historical context. The United States underwent notable transformations and advancements during the late 19th century.

Industrialization was a defining feature of the late 19th century. The United States experienced a period of accelerated industrial expansion, characterized by significant technological advancements that resulted in the nation’s emergence as a dominant industrial force. The transition from an agrarian to an industrial society led to profound changes in the people’s lifestyles and labour practices. The literature of the era accurately captured these shifts, as authors engaged with the societal implications brought about by the process of industrialization.

Urbanization was another critical aspect of the late 19th century. Cities expanded as people migrated in pursuit of job prospects and improved living conditions. Urban centres became melting pots of cultural diversity and social change, influencing the themes and settings of literature. The phenomenon of urbanization provided writers with fresh material for their works, thereby prompting an exploration of the intricacies of urban life and the distinctive obstacles it entails.

The late 19th century witnessed significant shifts in societal norms and values. Authors of the Fin de Siècle period delved into issues such as the transformation of gender roles, evolving class structures, and moral dilemmas. They challenged conventional thinking and embraced unconventional themes in their works. This period marked a time of intellectual inquiry and reflection.

The emergence of diverse literary movements occurred during the late 19th century in America. Naturalism, influenced by scientific determinism, explored the darker aspects of human behaviour and characteristics. Regionalism is an artistic movement that centres on the depiction of distinct geographical regions and their unique cultures. These movements offered a diverse range of perspectives on American life and culture.

International influences, particularly from Europe, played a significant role in shaping American literature during the Fin de Siècle period. The distinct character of the era in American literature was influenced by the introduction of European literary movements, namely symbolism and decadence.

The allure towards novelty and unfamiliarity played a central role during the Fin de Siècle. This period was characterized by a fascination with innovation and a willingness to venture into unexplored domains. During this period, artists and writers were attracted to subjects that had the potential to evoke unease and were yet to be thoroughly examined, as they sought novel methods of artistic representation and analysis.

The Fin de Siècle is not confined to a specific set of years but rather symbolizes an extended period of cultural and intellectual exploration. It encompassed a diverse array of artistic movements, spanning from symbolism and decadence to the emergence of modernism. This diversity of influences and ideas created a complex landscape in American literature, which can be interpreted as a reflection of larger cultural transformations of the time.

Furthermore, Talia Schaffer's research in *Literature and Culture at the Fin de Siècle* is of paramount importance. In her study, Schaffer delves into the intricate

cultural dynamics of the Fin de Siècle as she writes about it as a time that “was widely thought to be a period of social degeneracy, with people hoping for a new beginning”, placing particular emphasis on the era’s deep fascination with aestheticism, decadence and the complexities of modernity. Her examination of the interplay between literature, art and societal changes contributes significantly to our comprehension of the era’s impact on American literature (Schaffer, 2006).

In Lisa Lowe and David Lloyd’s book, *The Politics of Culture in the Shadow of Capital*, the authors provide an in-depth analysis of the concept of the Fin de Siècle. This period is characterized by significant economic, political and social changes as it’s pointed out that “...sometime in the late nineteenth century there is seen to be a breakthrough, a movement forward out of darkness and subjection, toward progress, independence...”, primarily attributed to the increasing dominance of capitalism and imperialism. Lowe and Lloyd’s research highlights the interdependence of socio-political factors and cultural manifestations, providing insight into their impact on American literature in this particular period (Lowe & Lloyd, 1997).

Moreover, Dr. Saler has accurately outlined the evolving waves of scholarly and popular writings about the Fin de Siècle. The initial phase, commonly referred to as the First Wave, arose during the late 19th century with the introduction of the term “*fin-de-siècle*, first caught on after being used as the title of a French play in 1888” (Beck, 2018). This period primarily centred around aesthetic modernism and its deliberate departure from the prevailing late Victorianism. During this phase, there was some debate about the precise temporal boundaries of the fin-de-siècle, whether it occurred only in the 1890s or extended to 1914. It was generally agreed upon that this cultural phenomenon was predominantly limited to Europe and North America, with London and Paris serving as the primary epicentres (Beck, 2018).

The Second Wave, which followed World War I, broadened the comprehension of the fin-de-siècle to the years from 1870 to 1914. This perspective viewed the period as a socio-cultural moment within the larger context of Western

modernity. The cultural movements that emerged during the fin-de-siècle, such as “Impressionism, Decadence, Symbolism and Naturalism”, were seen as expressions that enabled wider changes across various aspects of life, including “economic, political, religious, intellectual, social and scientific” spheres (Beck, 2018).

The Third Wave, as exemplified by literary works such as *World in the Fin-de-Siècle*, adopts a comprehensive perspective on the fin-de-siècle period, highlighting its transnational nature. This perspective considers the era of New Imperialism, the establishment of trans-oceanic communication and transportation systems, the phenomenon of migrations and the emergence of multi-ethnic mega-cities, recognizing that these developments affected people worldwide. The Third Wave’s writings emphasize that the fin-de-siècle period was “not limited to matters of aesthetics”, but rather encompassed a wide range of human activities and pursuits, acknowledging the global nature of scientific discoveries, cultural diffusion and mass production and culture (Beck, 2018).

Additionally, Elaine Showalter’s seminal work *Sexual Anarchy: Gender and Culture* presents a gender-centric perspective on the Fin de Siècle period. Showalter emphasizes the importance of the Fin de Siècle as a “time of significant disruptions in gender norms and sexual identities” (Showalter, 1990). Her analysis of dynamic transformations in women’s roles, “the odd woman – the woman who can not marry – undermined the comfortable boundary system of Victorian sexuality and gender roles” and progressive notions of masculinity contributes significantly to understanding how these societal changes were reflected in American literature (Showalter, 1990).

The impact of the Fin de Siècle on American literature was considerable and complex. It manifested in several specific ways, influencing not only the thematic content of literary works but also the very structure and techniques employed by American authors during this era. Scholars have provided valuable insights into this impact, grounded in empirical research and analysis.

One prominent consequence of the Fin de Siècle on American literature was the infusion of decadent and aesthetic principles. Authors such as Oscar Wilde and European Decadents introduced American writers with novel forms of artistic representation, distinguished by elaborate prose, the rejection of conventional morality and a focus on sensual experiences. This influence can be observed in the works of American authors like Edith Wharton and Henry James during this period. According to Mark Hearn in *The Fin de Siècle and the Multiple Temporalities of Historical Periodization*, the interest in decadence reflected “a sense of limitation and a fascination with the unfamiliar” because this period was as “an anxious transition to twentieth century modernity”, which shaped the literary expressions of the era significantly (Hearn, 2022).

During the Fin de Siècle era in America, there was a notable incorporation of symbolism into literary works. Symbolist poets and writers, particularly those of French descent, were instrumental in the development and popularization of the concept of representing abstract ideas and emotions through tangible and frequently obscure visual representations. American authors such as Stephen Crane and Paul Laurence Dunbar adopted this particular literary style, employing symbols as a method to effectively communicate the intricacies and paradoxes inherent in a swiftly evolving society.

Literary aesthetic experimentation was encouraged during the Fin de Siècle. Henry James in *The Turn of the Screw* employed intricate narrative structures, unreliable narrators, and ambiguity to engage readers in the interpretation of texts. Marion Thain and Ana Parejo Vadillo, in *Fin-de-Siècle Renaissance: Diversity, History, Modernity*, delve into the philosophical and literary aspects of the Fin de Siècle and how idealistic ideologies influenced American literature. Moreover, Thain and Vadillo’s research offers insights into the innovative literary techniques employed by American authors during this era as they write that “there is no doubt that this is a period defined by modernity and a desire to be *modern*” (Thain & Vadillo, 2006).

During the Fin de Siècle period, literary figures explored the intricacies of the human mind, drawing inspiration from the burgeoning field of psychology. The impact of Freudian concepts pertaining to the unconscious mind and irrational human behaviours is readily discernible within the realm of American literature. In his publication titled *Popular Culture and Performance in the Fin de Siècle*, Peter Bailey examines the inclination of authors such as Henry James to delve into the complex and frequently paradoxical facets of the human psyche (Bailey, 2002).

The Fin de Siècle was a period of intellectual exploration and a challenge to conventional thinking. Authors grappled with shifting gender roles, evolving class structures and moral dilemmas. Lyn Pykett, in *The Improper Feminine: The Women's Sensation Novel and the New Woman Writing*, explores how the New Woman movement and evolving feminist perspectives influenced American women writers so their protagonists became “passionate, devious, dangerous and not infrequently deranged heroines” (Pykett, 1992).

American literature was also greatly influenced by the Fin de Siècle, particularly in relation to the gay community and identity. Kristin Mahoney in *Michael Field and Queer Community at the Fin de Siècle* emphasizes the exploration of non-conforming identities during this period. In order to negotiate gender and sexuality in their writing, Edith Cooper and Katharine Bradley adopted the pen name Michael Field. The social mores of the day are questioned by this unorthodox approach to authorship and identity. As Mahoney writes, “During the 1890s, same-sex erotic investments opened out onto broader innovations in the realm of community, facilitating a wide range of Utopian approaches to connection and kinship” (Mahoney, 2016). It becomes evident that throughout the Fin de Siècle, there were social and cultural shifts that followed the growing acceptance of different sexual orientations and identities. Opinions concerning sexuality and gender roles were among those that changed. Literature was employed to discuss and contest social mores (Mahoney, 2016).

So, American literature was greatly influenced by the Fin de Siècle era. It was a period of blending artistic and decadent ideas, experimenting with literary aesthetics, using symbols, studying the human mind and making intellectual challenges to conventional norms, particularly those related to gender roles. Additionally, the era played a crucial role in the emergence of diverse sexual orientations and identities. The complex influence of new art and societal changes throughout the 19th and early 20th centuries greatly altered American literature.

1.2. Pre-Fin de Siècle Notions of the American Dream

To comprehensively understand the evolution of the American Dream during the Fin de Siècle, it is essential to explore its antecedents in the decades leading up to this transformative period. The Pre-Fin de Siècle era, characterized by the late 19th century, bore witness to significant precursors that laid the foundation for the American Dream's evolving definition.

During the pre-Fin de Siècle period, the concept of the American Dream included a complex combination of ideologies that revolved around the principles of individualism, self-determination and the pursuit of happiness. It was less associated with material wealth and more with the moral and philosophical principles of liberty and opportunity. This period, before the dawn of the 20th century, saw the American Dream as a narrative of personal improvement and democratic ideals rather than the mere accumulation of material possessions.

It was an ethos rooted in the Jeffersonian ideal of yeoman farmers – the belief in the dignity of agrarian work and the virtue of living close to the land. The Homestead Act of 1862, which granted land to settlers willing to tame the wilderness, is a testament to this era's vision of the Dream, where property ownership was linked to the cultivation and improvement of the land, reflecting a nation's expansionist spirit and its citizens' self-reliance. Education and intellectual advancement were also highly regarded as components of the Dream, with the establishment of land-grant

colleges aimed at promoting higher education in agriculture and the mechanical arts. The late 19th century American Dream, therefore, was not only about achieving personal success but also about contributing to the common good through innovation, education and responsible citizenship.

The sociopolitical landscape was marked by rapid expansion westward, the closure of the American frontier and the aftereffects of the Civil War, which collectively nurtured a belief in the possibility of reinvention and new beginnings. From an economic standpoint, the advent of industrialization brought forth novel prospects and complexities, thereby establishing a framework in which the concept of the American Dream was both scrutinized and ardently pursued. The American Dream experienced a major change during this time, paving a foundation for later materialistic interpretations that appeared in the 20th century.

The closure of the American frontier and the consequences of the Civil War were major events that led to a transformation of cultural narratives in the United States. This was a time when the nation had to reconcile its idealistic visions of boundless opportunity and individual freedom with the realities of a closed geographical frontier and the deep scars of conflict. These events prompted a reassessment of national identity and the concept of the American Dream, transitioning from a frontier mentality to one focused on industrialization and urban development. The literature of this period often grappled with themes of disillusionment, inequality and social reform, reflecting the complex dynamics of a nation in the process of redefining its identity and aspirations.

The renowned author Ralph Waldo Emerson wrote in the middle of the 19th century about concepts that would later aid in the conceptualization of the American Dream. Emerson highlighted independence, self-sufficiency, and the natural talents that each person possesses in his essay *Self-Reliance* (1841). His support of the notion that one can control one's own destiny helped pave the way for the later connection between the American Dream and achievement with self-improvement (Emerson, 2021).

The Transcendental Movement, spearheaded by figures such as Ralph Waldo Emerson and Henry David Thoreau, profoundly influenced the concept of personal success within the framework of the American Dream. This philosophical movement posited that true success was found in self-reliance, personal integrity and intellectual independence, rather than the accumulation of wealth or societal status. Transcendentalists argued that a successful life was one lived in harmony with nature and in accordance with one's inner moral compass. Their ideas fostered an American ethos that valued the individual's journey towards spiritual and moral perfection over material gains, thereby impacting the collective consciousness of the time and shaping the American Dream's early ethos.

Similarly, Henry David Thoreau, in his transcendental work *Walden* (1854), explored themes of simplicity, self-sufficiency and the pursuit of a meaningful life as he writes that "All men want, not something to do with, but something to do, or rather something to be" (Thoreau, 1999). Thoreau's advocacy for a conscious and purposeful existence that transcends the limitations of materialism has found resonance in subsequent interpretations of the American Dream, which emphasize the pursuit of a meaningful and goal-oriented life rather than a mere focus on obtaining wealth and possessions (Thoreau, 1999).

Horatio Alger, through his numerous "rags to riches" stories, contributed to the early notion of the American Dream. His works, such as *Ragged Dick* (1867), depicted characters that rose from poverty to prosperity through hard work, perseverance and determination. Alger's narratives reinforced the belief that success was attainable through individual effort, setting a precedent for later variations of the American Dream that emphasized upward mobility (Alger, 2021).

In his book *The Idea of Progress in America, 1815-1860*, Arthur Ekirch delves into the intellectual climate of the mid-19th century and how notions of progress, optimism and individualism contributed to the American Dream's development, „progress represented a measurable growth in the pursuit of knowledge and in the achievements of science as well as an advance in the ability of men to control for

good their own lives and destinies” (Ekirch, 1944, p. 11). Ekirch’s research highlights the philosophical underpinnings that would shape the American Dream’s trajectory in the later Fin de Siècle period, “...in the future national grandeur would be based upon the peaceful development, to the fullest extent, of a nation’s resources” (Ekirch, 1944, p. 230).

The Pre-Fin de Siècle era was also characterized by the ongoing expansion and exploration of the western regions of the United States, significantly impacting the American Dream. Historian Frederick Jackson Turner, in his influential essay *The Significance of the Frontier in American History* (1893), put forth the argument that the existence of the frontier had been a driving force behind American individualism, democracy and opportunity. As Turner states, “The existence of an area of free land, its continuous recession, and the advance of American settlement westward, explain American development” (Turner, 2009). His frontier thesis emphasized the spatial and geographical aspects of the American Dream, shaping the understanding of the Dream’s connection to uncharted horizons.

Moreover, the transition of the American Dream from an ethos to a concrete aspiration of wealth and property began in the late 19th century, as industrialization and urbanization rapidly transformed American society. The allure of the cities, with their burgeoning industries, promised opportunities for wealth creation unlike anything seen before in rural America. This period witnessed the rise of the middle class and the expansion of consumer culture, which began to equate the American Dream with homeownership, material possessions and a comfortable lifestyle. The industrial economy not only redefined success in material terms but also made such success seem attainably universal, shifting the American Dream from a philosophical concept to a more tangible goal centred around economic prosperity.

As America transitioned from an agrarian to an industrial society post-Civil War, the literature of the pre-Fin de Siècle period reflected the societal shift. Authors depicted the growing pains of a nation struggling to integrate the contrasting values of rural traditions and urban modernity. The American Dream, once synonymous

with the freedom of the open frontier, began to be redefined within the context of urban landscapes and factory life. This was a time of remarkable contrasts, as rapid technological progress coincided with significant social inequalities, which were vividly captured in the narratives of the era, providing a critical lens through which to view the evolving American ethos.

During the period following the Civil War in America, characterized by the shift from an agrarian to an industrialized economy, the notion of the American Dream started to exhibit gender-based divisions. Historically, men have frequently been regarded as the primary architects of their own fate, with their ambitions becoming increasingly intertwined with the economic prospects offered by a thriving industry. In contrast, the contours of the American Dream were less clearly defined and more restricted for women due to societal expectations. However, there was a growing awareness of women's rights.

In addition, the Pre-Fin de Siècle American Dream for women was one of both participation and exclusion. While they contributed to the nation-building efforts alongside men, women were not afforded the same rights to property, legal standing, or the vote. The American Revolution provided a platform for women like Abigail Adams to voice their desire for recognition, yet it wasn't until the 1920's Nineteenth Amendment that women's suffrage was secured. Figures like Fanny Fern advocated for women's rights through her writings, highlighting the struggles and resilience of women in the face of societal constraints. These contributions and protests laid the groundwork for future feminist movements that would more radically challenge the gendered limitations of the American Dream.

Within the realm of contemporary scholarly discourse, the American Dream is frequently portrayed as a concept that is more comprehensive and diverse in nature when compared to its predecessor from the pre-Fin de Siècle era. Contemporary analyses, exemplified by Hanson and White's work titled *The American Dream in the 21st Century*, propose that the concept of the American Dream has undergone

transformations to mirror shifts in society, encompassing heightened cognizance of matters pertaining to race, gender, religion and ethics (Hanson & White, 2011).

These contemporary interpretations can be viewed as both a continuation of the original principles and a divergence from them. Opportunity for all is still at the centre of the American Dream, but its meaning has broadened to include a greater range of societal and cultural goals. Individual achievement has lost importance in favour of a more communal conception of progress, which includes a critical analysis of structural impediments that might prevent the Dream from becoming a reality for every member of society.

Moreover, Churchwell's research demonstrates that the initial connotations of the concepts "American Dream" which wasn't "used to describe a collective, generalisable national ideal of any kind, let alone an economic one" before 1900s and "America First" diverged significantly from their contemporary interpretations, with the latter even acquiring associations with far-right ideologies during the 1930s (Churchwell, 2019). The concept of the "American Dream" initially served as a response to the idea of personal prosperity, but during the Cold War era, it underwent a transformation to endorse a consumer-oriented capitalist democracy, a perspective that has predominantly endured.

So, the pre-Fin de Siècle American Dream summarized the desire for self-determination in a rapidly industrializing society. Men's ambitions were largely linked to economic progress and innovation, while women, faced with social constraints, sought recognition and equality, laying the foundations for elections and other broader rights. The cultural narratives of this era, shaped by figures such as Emerson and Thoreau, reflected an American philosophy in transition, increasingly influenced by industrialization and urbanization. As the 20th century approached, these stories evolved to reflect the country's growing complexity, foreshadowing the future evolution of the American dream.

1.3. Evolution of the American Dream in the Fin de Siècle Context

During the late 19th century in the United States, a time characterized by rapid industrialization and territorial expansion, the notion of the American Dream was significantly shaped by the ideology of individualism. The notion was defined by the capacity for every individual to attain prosperity through diligent endeavour, as mentioned in *American dreamers: How the left changed a nation*, “Midwesterners working toward a "cooperative commonwealth"; immigrant industrial workers...fighting for a decent living; urban bohemians looking to transform gender as well as class relations” (Kazin, 2011). The Fin de Siècle period witnessed notable transformations in both the cultural and economic spheres, characterized by the rise of industrial tycoons and a widening wealth gap between the privileged and impoverished social classes.

At the dawn of the 20th century, the American Dream evolved alongside the philosophical and economic changes during America’s fin de siècle. The previously dominant laissez-faire liberalism which had extolled the virtues of free markets for economic self-reliance, came under scrutiny for its shortcomings that led to economic and social disparities. The severe economic downturns of the late 19th century highlighted the need for a new approach. Progressivism evolved to meet this need, proposing government intervention to correct imbalances caused by unregulated markets while still upholding the foundational American principles of economic order and representative governance.

As progressivism took root, it aimed to reframe the American Dream, adapting it to the new realities of the industrial age. This movement “insisted that a minimum of economic and social equality was necessary for a democracy to function” (Mills, 2021). Hence, the American Dream was reimagined not only as a quest for individual success but also as a collective aspiration toward a society where democratic participation is supported by a fairer economic system (Mills, 2021).

The theoretical framework proposed by Jacques Derrida's deconstruction presents a valuable perspective for analyzing the fluctuating nature of the American Dream in this particular era. Derrida posited that cultural constructs, such as the American Dream, exhibit a dynamic nature, being shaped and continually reconfigured through linguistic practices, thereby remaining susceptible to constant reinterpretation (Derrida, 1978).

During this time, the narrative of the American Dream was frequently illustrated by the archetype of the "self-made man" meaning "that all Americans have a reasonable chance to achieve success as they define it – material or otherwise – through their own efforts, and to attain virtue and fulfillment through success", encapsulating the stories of individuals who rose from modest origins to secure substantial wealth (Hochschild, 1995). This narrative, however, rendered invisible the structural and economic impediments that precluded many from attaining such success.

Drawing upon Derrida's analysis of cultural identity, one could contend that the American Dream is inherently paradoxical, defined as much by the people it purports to include as it is by those it excludes in its promise of personal achievement (Pease, 1994). The Dream served as a powerful motivator for individual aspirations as well as an ideological facade that concealed systemic injustices within the social order.

The representation of individualism in the late-nineteenth-century American Dream was complex, embodied in various forms of cultural expression such as literature and art while also being challenged by critiques of the era's social and economic inequities, labor conditions and the limited social mobility experienced by many so "the dominant definition of America continued to be that of a country dedicated to the individual pursuit of private wealth" (Trachtenberg, 2007).

Derrida's theoretical framework asserts that the meaning and importance attributed to the American Dream undergoes perpetual transformation, as it is shaped by historical events, societal shifts and individual accounts. Therefore, the depiction

of individualism within the framework of the American Dream in the latter part of the 19th century establishes a dichotomy between the endeavor to achieve personal prosperity and the complex circumstances of a developing American society (Bloom & Hobby, 2009).

By employing Derrida's deconstructionist concepts, it is critical to situate the American Dream within the specific historical milieu of the late 19th century. Transitioning from individualism to a broader social perspective demands an examination of the literary canon of the era, which serves as an archive of collective consciousness. This literary composition depicts a society undergoing change and presents a challenge to the American Dream, all the while reflecting and criticizing the prevalent sentiment of the time. Because fin de siècle texts oscillate between the material conditions of a diverse America and the ideological objectives of individualism, we must read them through this prism. Understanding how the American Dream changed and evolved to meet those demands thus requires a scholarly analysis of fiction of this era.

In the context of post-Civil War and pre-WWI American society, the American Dream's evolution is discernible through the literary output of the period, which often depicted a nation confronting deep-seated divisions. Apocalyptic themes were used in this era's literature to reflect "societal disquiet, the transition from rural to urban realities and address the challenges of achieving unity" (Fisher, 2020). These narratives examined the viability of the American Dream within a society marked by increasing class disparities and racial tensions, offering a critical lens on the period's cultural and economic transformations.

At the turn of the 20th century, apocalyptic literature became popular. The social and economic challenges facing the US at the time were reflected in this trend. This literary subgenre gave authors a secular platform from which they could investigate and critique issues of violence, dehumanization, and the persistence of racial and class disparities. These narratives were crucial in examining how such issues hampered the realization of the American Dream for many, serving as a

commentary on the nation's struggles with its own defining ideals. The apocalyptic motif thus provided a framework for a critical discussion of the cultural and economic shifts of the era (Fisher, 2020).

The U.S. entry into World War I signified a pivotal realignment in American literature from the introspection of domestic issues to a broader engagement with international threats. This evolution mirrored the transformation of the American Dream, which had previously been rooted in the pursuit of individual prosperity within a national framework. The literature of the period began to reflect a collective consciousness concerned with America's place in a global context, contemplating the implications of war and the nation's role in upholding democratic ideals abroad.

This narrative expansion is effectively captured by Fisher, who articulates, "With the entry of the United States into World War I, apocalyptic rhetoric shifted from an isolationist focus on internal divisions to an awareness of external dangers to the nation" (Fisher, 2020). The literature of this era reflected a complex interplay between national identity and international responsibilities, chronicling not only the nation's outward gaze but also critically evaluating how the American Dream was being reshaped by the demands of global politics and conflicts.

The evolution of the American Dream during the *fin de siècle* period coincided with and was arguably facilitated by the technological advancements of the era. The physical connectivity made possible by the telegraph and railroads allowed literature to shift from an introspective approach to an all-encompassing, global dynamic perspective. As a result, the literary and technological developments of the time were entwined, reflecting and bolstering the evolution of the American Dream from a national to a global ideal.

In the *fin de siècle* era, the telegraph and the railroad were not merely technological achievements; they were transformative forces that redefined the American Dream. Emerson poetically described railroads as "a magician's rod, in its power to evoke the sleeping energies of land and water" (Emerson, 2016). This metaphor captures the essence of the impact of the railroad: it was an agent of

economic prosperity and a symbol of progress, intertwining with the telegraph to forge a line of communication that bound the nation together. The railroad and telegraph network facilitated new connections, fostering the growth of towns and the exchange of ideas. It was through these innovations that the American Dream expanded to embody a collective aspiration for progress, uniting disparate regions and communities into a single, forward-looking nation.

Transitioning from the impact of technological innovation to demographic changes, the fin de siècle era represented a time of profound change for the American Dream. The expansion of communication and transportation networks accompanied the diversity of the American population. As the telegraph and railroad drew together distant parts of the country, the inflow of immigrants introduced new cultural narratives and challenges. This demographic change, coupled with technological advances, contributed to a redefined American Dream that now had to reconcile the traditional notions of opportunity and success with the multicultural realities of a changing nation.

The fin de siècle period in America was marked by significant wave of immigration which profoundly affected the American social fabric and the formation of the American Dream. The immigrant narrative added layers of complexity to the Dream, introducing a range of experiences from the search for prosperity to the struggle for cultural assimilation. As immigrants arrived, seeking freedom and opportunity, they often encountered “unimaginable obstacles” while sharing a common experience of isolation that became a defining aspect of life (*The Immigrant American Dream*, n.d.). The literature and cultural artifacts of the era reflect this sentiment, which highlights the diversity of immigrant experiences and the reshaping of the American Dream.

The impact of immigrants on the American Dream is likewise evident in cultural manifestations, including literature, wherein Emma Lazarus’s *The New Colossus* emerges as an emblem of optimism for recent immigrants to the United States. However, as the literature of the era portrays, the lived experiences of these

immigrants frequently diverge dramatically from such idealistic promises. The dichotomy illustrates the complex and ever-changing development of the American Dream and the impact of immigration on national aspirations and values (Lazarus, 2007).

During the *fin de siècle* period in the United States, the experiences of African Americans and other minority groups added layers of complexity to the narrative of the American Dream, especially in the wake of waves of immigration. For African Americans, the post-Reconstruction era did not bring the expected justice; instead, they continued to face systemic barriers like Jim Crow laws, which reinforced racial segregation and economic disparity. For them, the American Dream was not just a distant vision but also a daily challenge rife with systemic inequalities. In his work, Eric Yellin also highlights this complex experience of black professionals although he says that “patronage networks... may actually have provided some institutional fairness at least in a government vulnerable to racial discrimination” (Yellin, 2013). But even though these people occupied high-ranking positions in their community, they could not avoid being targeted by racist society.

Parallel to this, at the turn of the century added additional complexity to the narrative of the American Dream. The idealism that welcomed immigrants with the promise of freedom and prosperity often clashed with the realities of xenophobia, labor exploitation and cultural exclusion.

During the *fin de siècle* period, the narrative surrounding the American Dream was imbued with the experiences of immigrants, thereby establishing a basis for embracing wider social inclusivity, including the pursuit of gender equality. This development signifies the era’s active re-evaluation of the collective ethos, with the objective of broadening democratic involvement during the transition of the century.

The women’s suffrage movement during the *fin de siècle* era represented a significant milestone in the evolution of the American Dream, as it broadened the scope of its commitment to achieving gender equality. This period of women’s political activism was not simply an isolated episode but a continuation of a long

history of female advocacy for their rights in the United States (*Leaving all to younger hands*, n. d.). The 19th Amendment, granting women the right to vote, was not the end but the beginning of a new chapter, “the next stage in the history of women’s political activism – a story that is still unfolding”, reflecting a broader historical narrative of women as dedicated political actors even without enfranchisement (*Leaving all to younger hands*, n. d.).

The demands of the suffrage movement posed a challenge to prevailing ideologies that marginalized women and denied them equal political rights, thereby relegating them to a subordinate status in society. This challenge required conceptualizing women collectively to address their shared plight within a political context, although this often ignored the diverse experiences of women of colour, highlighting how racism intersected with feminism (*Leaving all to younger hands*, n. d.).

By the early 20th century, as women increasingly participated in public life, the denial of the right to vote became an unresolvable contradiction, culminating in the ratification of the 19th Amendment. In regard to women and the democratic system in the United States, the recent legislative triumph indicates a significant turning point. It establishes a solid basis for long-term political engagement, as demonstrated by the increasing presence of female candidates in 21st-century elections (*Leaving all to younger hands*, n. d.). However, as Zabala points out through the lens of Woolf’s critique, earlier literary works reveal a more complex reality (Zabala, 2016). These stories, like Chopin’s *The Awakening* and Gilman’s *The Yellow Wallpaper*, showed the difference between getting votes and being able to have a say in how democracy works. They illustrated that “women of the period did not achieve the results that they hoped for immediately” (Zabala, 2016) and still had a long way to go before they could achieve the American Dream.

So, the fin de siècle period in the United States was a transformative period for the American Dream which underwent a dramatic redefinition from individual philosophy to collective social goals, reflecting the nation’s struggle against rapid

industrialization, demographic changes and emerging global identities. This era, captured through the critical lens of Derrida's deconstruction, revealed the Dream's inherent contradictions and growing gap between its aspirational narrative and the lived realities of minorities, immigrants and women. As the United States entered the 20th century, cultural contributions from a diverse population and technological advancements like the railroad and telegraph gave new meaning and challenges to the American Dream.

1.4. Representation of the American Dream in the Fin de Siècle Literature

1.4.1. The American Dream in *The Awakening* and *The Yellow Wallpaper*

The idea of the "American Dream", which is typically associated with ideas of social progress, prosperity, and freedom, is thoroughly re-examined considering fin de siècle literature. Deep examinations of this theme through the perspectives of female protagonists can be found in Kate Chopin's *The Awakening* and Charlotte Perkins Gilman's *The Yellow Wallpaper*.

There are three main arguments that can be advanced to support the idea that *The Yellow Wallpaper* fits within the framework of the American Dream, particularly from the perspective of a woman's societal role during the late 19th century. At this time, the American Dream often meant a comfortable middle-class life, with a focus on domestic stability, normalcy and economic viability – ideals primarily accessible to men. For women, the Dream was more prescriptive, emphasizing domestic roles and duties in the home rather than personal fulfilment or economic success.

"A colonial mansion, a hereditary estate, I would say a haunted house, and reach the height of romantic felicity – but that would be asking too much of fate!

Still I will proudly declare that there is something queer about it.

Else, why should it be let so cheaply? And why have stood so long untenanted?

John is practical in the extreme. He has no patience with faith, an intense horror of superstition, and he scoffs openly at any talk of things not to be felt and seen and put down in figures” (Gilman, 2018, p. 1).

The passage elucidates the protagonist's ambivalent emotions regarding the house and her position within it. The mention of a “colonial mansion” and “hereditary estate” initially alludes to the manifestation of the American Dream, yet the subsequent inquiries made by the narrator expose her feelings of uncertainty and doubt regarding the authenticity of her circumstances. This reflects a larger societal conflict where women’s prescribed roles in the home, which were supposed to embody the American Dream, became their prisons. John’s pragmatic approach and disregard for her concerns further emphasize the gender contradiction between personal ambitions and societal norms, thereby illustrating the inherent challenges faced by women in realizing the elusive ideals of freedom and happiness promised by the American Dream. These obstacles were primarily rooted in the prevailing patriarchal structures that exerted control over women’s lives during that era.

The protagonist of *The Yellow Wallpaper* is a middle-class woman who is essentially confined to the rented home under the guise of “rest cure”, a popular treatment for women’s mental health issues during the fin de siècle period. This imprisonment represents the limits imposed on women’s roles, contrasting sharply with the promise of freedom and the pursuit of happiness in the American Dream. Her husband’s control over her life and the domestic space in which she is trapped reflect the societal norms that domesticated women, viewing them as fragile and incapable of handling the outside world or their professional responsibilities.

The primary protagonist’s fixation on the wallpaper in her living quarters serves as a symbolic representation of the confinement experienced by women within the realm of domesticity, as well as their marginalization from the aspirations of the American Dream, which emphasize autonomy and financial self-sufficiency. Gilman's research argues that the realization of the American Dream requires the

acknowledgment and resolution of underlying disparities that impede women's complete engagement in societal affairs.

Similar to this, Kate Chopin's *The Awakening* explores the nuances of the American Dream via the character of Edna Pontellier, who battled for fulfilment and autonomy. Edna's story unfolds as she seeks both self-reliance and affection from her family, a quest that conflicts with the strict societal expectations placed on women in her time. Her desires reflect a deeper, more personal interpretation of the American Dream, one that goes beyond the conventional pursuit of wealth and status to include a desire for emotional and psychological freedom.

Chopin illustrates the conflict between material wealth and personal contentment, a central element of the American Dream, by contrasting Edna's affluent lifestyle with her inner feelings of dissatisfaction. Thus, despite her material comfort, Edna's deepest aspirations cannot be satisfied by opulence alone, echoing views that challenge the conventional association between success and material accumulation matter.

"Mrs. Pontellier talked about her father's Mississippi plantation and her girlhood home in the old Kentucky blue-grass country. She was an American woman, with a small infusion of French which seemed to have been lost in dilution" (Chopin, 2016, p. 9).

This quotation pertains to aspects of the American Dream as exemplified by Mrs. Pontellier's background. Her reminiscing about her father's plantation and her childhood home in Kentucky connects to the dream's ideals of prosperity and a rooted, idyllic American life.

The novel also raises doubts about the endurance of the American Dream as an ideology, given its limited capacity to encompass the diverse experiences of various societal groups, particularly women. The proposition argues that the American Dream served as a symbolic manifestation of hopefulness, despite its inherent contradictions and the existence of unequal opportunities within society.

These works examine the limitations that social norms place on women and how these limitations influence and distort the individual's pursuit of the American Dream. In *The Awakening*, Chopin dissects Edna Pontellier's transformation as she grapples with her identity beyond the roles of wife and mother, roles that are considered the epitome of the American Dream but suppress her personality. Similarly, *The Yellow Wallpaper* traces the narrator's descent into madness, a dark result of the era's prescribed domesticity. Both narratives serve as critical commentaries on gender disparities of the Dream, using their protagonists' fates to question the universality and accessibility of its promises.

The main characters in *The Awakening* and *The Yellow Wallpaper* experience the American Dream as an elusive aspiration, further complicated by their seclusion. It acts as both a catalyst and an obstacle to their pursuit of the American Dream. In *The Awakening*, Edna Pontellier's physical separation from society on Grand Isle serves as an essential moment for introspection and self-discovery while also highlighting her alienation from the societal embodiment of the American Dream. Likewise, the narrator's forced isolation in *The Yellow Wallpaper*, allegedly for her health, paradoxically leads to a decline in her mental wellness, highlighting the destructive effects of isolation on the quest for self-fulfilment. Both Edna and the narrator's experiences show how isolation can be a profound barrier, separating them not only from others but also from the life they should aspire to, highlighting the difference between societal dreams and individual realities.

The theme of women's societal roles at the fin de siècle intersects with several key themes in *The Awakening* and *The Yellow Wallpaper*, such as autonomy, mental health and the conflict between personal desires and societal expectations. These topics are also reflected in the broader cultural and artistic trends of the time, including the rise of the New Woman – a concept challenging traditional femininity and domestic roles – and the portrayal of complex female characters in literature and art.

During the fin de siècle period, societal expectations for women were largely determined by the “Cult of Domesticity” which idealized women’s roles as devoted wives and mothers, limited to the family. In *The Awakening*, Edna Pontellier struggles with these constraints, longing for personal and artistic freedom, while in *The Yellow Wallpaper*, the remaining cure is imposed on the narrator, a common treatment for women’s mental health issues at the time, highlighting the oppression of the era. The two stories bring out a profound conflict: the individualized pursuit of the American dream versus the restrictive societal norms dictated for women.

Exploring the fin de siècle literature reveals the crucial role of symbolism as a narrative strategy used by authors to explore the complex sociocultural themes of the time. In *The Awakening* by Kate Chopin and *The Yellow Wallpaper* by Charlotte Perkins Gilman, symbols play a key role in the story. They give us more insight into the protagonists’ inner lives and the battles they face against societal expectations and rules. The sea and the wallpaper transcend their literal meanings, becoming powerful symbols that reflect the characters’ tempestuous journeys toward or against the ideals contained in the American Dream.

The sea functions as a potent symbol reflecting Edna Pontellier’s desire for freedom and escape from societal constraints. It represents the endless possibilities of the American Dream, but also the indomitable barriers that Edna faces as a woman seeking autonomy. The seductive call of the sea towards Edna symbolizes the allure of unattainable freedom and the overwhelming power that ultimately leads to her tragic end.

Charlotte Perkins Gilman’s *The Yellow Wallpaper* uses wallpaper as a metaphor for domestic space that both limits and defines the narrator’s reality. The pattern and the trapped figure within the wallpaper symbolize the constraints society places on women and the suffocating impact these limitations have on the female psyche. The narrator’s obsession with the wallpaper and her eventual descent into madness highlight the destructive nature of these barriers, which prevent her from achieving the personal freedom associated with the American Dream.

The protagonists of *The Awakening* and *The Yellow Wallpaper* can be seen as literary expressions of the anxieties and cultural changes of the time. These characters' divergence from traditional roles parallels the femme fatale figure, a symbol of the era's conflict over changing female identities. "A creation that both reflects and distorts the image of woman" (Albin, 2006), the femme fatale outlines the tension between the era's rigid gender norms and the emerging new woman, a tension vividly portrayed in Chopin's and Gilman's works.

In the late 19th century, women's social roles changed on both sides of the Atlantic, as shown in a study on religious identity in fin de siècle France (Machen, 2019). Women's active participation in religious communities, as Machen describes, challenged traditional gender roles and contributed to a reassessment of women's abilities beyond the private sphere. Secularism was on the rise during this time, but women's active participation in religious activities was an important way for them to claim a more visible and public identity.

In America, this renegotiation of women's roles is reflected in the literature of the period, particularly in *The Awakening* and *The Yellow Wallpaper*. Chopin and Gilman's protagonists struggle with the expectations imposed by their respective religious and societal norms, symbolizing a broader cultural shift towards modernity. Although not directly related to religious activism, the characters' quests for self-determination and the consequences they face may parallel the experiences of their European counterparts, who navigated the tensions between religious traditions and emerging feminist ideals.

So, *The Awakening* and *The Yellow Wallpaper* challenge the notion of freedom and self-fulfilment associated with the American Dream for women during the fin de siècle by illuminating its complexities. The protagonists' narratives highlight the dissonance between societal norms and individual desires, revealing a landscape where the American Dream, while celebrated, is critically inaccessible to women due to the prevailing gender and family restrictions of the era. The stories, through their insightful examination of female autonomy and mental health, serve as a literary

assessment of the American dream, questioning its validity and calling for a more inclusive re-imagining that recognizes and embraces the diverse aspirations and experiences of all members of society.

Conclusions to Chapter One

Taking place at the crossroads of the 19th and 20th centuries, the Fin de Siècle era in American literature was an essential period highlighted by major societal and cultural framework shifts. The current era is distinguished by a shift away from the romantic idealism prevalent in the early 19th century, towards a greater emphasis on themes rooted in realism and naturalism. The literary works of this era, including *The Awakening* by Kate Chopin and *The Yellow Wallpaper* by Charlotte Perkins Gilman, exhibit a notable examination of themes related to individual identity, moral intricacy and societal frameworks. The narratives offer a comprehensive assessment of the notion of the American Dream, expressing doubt about its achievability and emphasizing the constraints imposed by societal norms, particularly in relation to the experiences of women. The literary works produced during the Fin de Siècle period can be seen as a mirror of a society grappling with rapid changes and a pervasive feeling of uncertainty.

The use of symbolic elements such as the sea in *The Awakening* and the wallpaper in *The Yellow Wallpaper* extends beyond mere literary devices, serving as metaphors that illuminate the challenges encountered by the main characters. The symbols present in these narratives provide valuable insights into the gender dynamics and cultural tensions that were prevalent during the specific historical contexts in which the stories are set. During this era, there was a significant increase in awareness surrounding diverse identities and experiences, which prompted a thorough scrutiny of established values and societal expectations. Therefore, the idea of the “American Dream” has been subjected to both re-evaluation and redefinition in recent years. The literary works produced during this period function as a significant form of analysis and critique of the prevailing ideals of the time, questioning their applicability and inclusivity.

In addition, the influence of the Fin de Siècle can be seen well beyond the timeframe in which it occurred, as it can be seen in contemporary narratives and

discussions about society. Its examination of themes such as gender roles, societal expectations, and personal freedom continues to hold significance, providing a framework through which contemporary societal dynamics can be analysed. The literary era under consideration not only portrays the intricacies of its historical context but also maintains relevance by offering valuable insights into enduring themes such as identity, freedom and the pursuit of the American Dream.

During the research on the Fin de Siècle era in American literature, it was found out that this period was characterized by an enormous change in the understanding and interpretation of the American Dream. A comprehensive examination of influential literary pieces unveiled a significant departure from conventional, materialistic conceptions of the Dream, towards a more nuanced perception that incorporated societal critique and individual agency, particularly regarding the evolution of gender roles and social realism. This noteworthy discovery contributes to the academic understanding of the adaptability and resilience of the American Dream amidst shifting cultural and societal environments.

CHAPTER 2. COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS OF FEMINISM, GENDER INEQUALITY AND THE PURSUIT OF THE AMERICAN DREAM IN *THE AWAKENING* AND *THE YELLOW WALLPAPER*

In this chapter, we will analyse *The Awakening* by Kate Chopin and *The Yellow Wallpaper* by Charlotte Perkins Gilman within the context of the Fin de Siècle era. Specifically, we will focus on the way feminism and gender inequality interact with one another in these two short stories. This analysis will examine the nuanced portrayals of the American Dream in these narratives from a feminist perspective. We will explore the intricate roles that female characters play in the pursuit of their dreams, paying close attention to the societal norms and gender constraints that serve as an integral part in the formation of their experiences. This chapter will provide a comprehensive review of key characters from both works, providing insight on their battles against societal conventions as well as their search for personal freedom and identity.

2.1. Feminism, Gender Inequality and the American Dream in the Fin de Siècle Context

The fin de siècle, a term referring to the end of the 19th century and the beginning of the 20th, was noted by dramatic changes in the Western world's social, political and cultural spheres, with a particular emphasis on the United States. This period, which was marked by accelerated industrialization, urbanization and technological advancement, experienced a significant transformation in societal institutions and traditions (Showalter, 1990). The prevailing socio-political climate of the era was significantly shaped by the rise of novel political ideologies, such as socialism and anarchism, alongside the dominant force of nationalism. In addition, a

cultural uprising against Victorian conventions during this time led to the emergence of avant-garde literary and artistic movements.

One of the most conspicuous features of this era was the fluctuating societal roles and associated pressures placed on women. The conventional Victorian ideals, which primarily restricted women to the domains of domesticity and nurturing, started to encounter opposition. One significant phenomenon during this historical era was the rise of the “New Woman”, a term denoting women who actively pursued educational opportunities, engaged in political rights advocacy and sought employment. These actions directly challenged the prevailing gender norms that were prevalent during that era (Showalter, 1990). The portrayal of these women frequently depicted them as knowledgeable and self-reliant individuals who participated in activities traditionally associated with men, such as cycling and smoking. This representation served as an important clue to the shift in societal perspectives and presumptions concerning women.

Simultaneously, the *fin de siècle* was a period of heightened movements advocating for women’s suffrage and labour rights, reflecting a broader societal shift towards questioning and redefining established social hierarchies and norms. The cultural norms of this era were marked by a fascinating comparison of the traditional Victorian values of propriety and restraint, “Middle-class Victorian conventions called for the rigid segregation of children from adults and their training in self-restraint rather than self-expression” (Walkowitz, 1992, p. 296) with more progressive, bohemian ideals. This tension was vividly manifested in the literature, art and public discourse of the time. In addition, a general sense of doom and decadence characterized the period, reflecting the fears and uncertainties that the fast changes had caused in society.

The latter half of the *fin de siècle* was significantly impacted by the emergence of feminist movements, a rise that was both a reaction to the shifting sociocultural environment and a driver of additional change. Developed in response to cultural

upheaval and industrialization, these social movements altered the discourse surrounding the position of women in society.

The origins of these feminist movements can be traced back to various socioeconomic changes, such as increased female labour-force participation and expanded educational opportunities for women. As the visibility of women in public life increased, they commenced expressing their dissent towards the limitations imposed by prevailing gender norms. The emergence of the “New Woman” during this period, marked by her commitment to acquiring knowledge, seeking employment opportunities and actively participating in political discussions, came to represent the growing feminist awareness (Showalter, 1990).

Women’s rights activists like Susan B. Anthony and Elizabeth Cady Stanton were central figures in these movements in the United States. The Nineteenth Amendment, which gave women the right to vote in the United States, was ratified in 1920 in large part due to their persistent efforts, which were bolstered by those of other activists. Feminist movements of the era were heterogeneous and pursued numerous objectives, including labour rights, educational reforms, suffrage and greater gender equality.

These feminist movements had a significant and wide-ranging effect on legal frameworks and social norms. Socially speaking, they questioned and started to undermine the antiquated Victorian gender stereotypes that had long kept women in the home and brought further realization that “the opportunity for complete human development could not and should not have been withheld from one half of the nation” (Flexner, 1996). These movements aided in a change in public opinion that over time normalized women’s participation in a variety of public and political spheres.

Significant legal reforms were the result of the efforts of these movements. The most important of these changes was the granting of suffrage to women, an unprecedented stride in the acceptance of women’s political rights. Further legal recognition of women’s rights in other domains, including education, property

ownership and employment, was also made possible by these movements. Women began to experience greater autonomy and opportunities for self-expression as a result of these transformations, which had repercussions beyond the realm of law (Flexner, 1996).

The feminist movements that arose during the *fin de siècle* era played a crucial role in not only contesting legal obstacles but also transforming the routine social behaviors, cultural portrayals and economic circumstances experienced by women. The intricate interactions that occurred during this time between gender and other social categories like race, class and ethnicity demonstrated the complexity of inequality.

The portrayal of the New Woman during this period, although representing a departure from conventional gender norms, frequently exhibited the influence of prevalent cultural and socioeconomic prejudices. The prevailing representation of the New Woman primarily depicted a woman of middle-class standing, possessing education and being of white ethnicity. The varied experiences and difficulties faced by women from different racial and ethnic backgrounds as well as those from lower socioeconomic classes were overlooked by this archetype although as Giddings argues “the greatest gains made by women have come in the wake of strident Black demands for their rights” (Giddings, 2001). This constraint highlights the significance of incorporating intersectionality into discussions surrounding gender inequality in the *fin de siècle* period.

The feminist movements gradually but significantly changed the deeply ingrained Victorian ideals that dominated the social practices of the time. The growing involvement of women in public domains, including employment and tertiary education, posed a challenge to the conventional societal expectations that confined them to domestic responsibilities. Not all societal groups experienced this shift to the same degree since women from lower socioeconomic backgrounds had previously entered the workforce because of financial hardships. Nevertheless, the

inclusion of women from middle and upper-class backgrounds in these domains signified a noteworthy cultural transformation (Hewitt, 2001).

Likewise, cultural depictions of women started to change during this time. The spheres of literature, art and the growing industry of cinema began to portray women in a more diverse range of roles, thereby echoing the evolving perspectives on women's abilities and societal positions. Yet, the portrayals frequently contained numerous contradictions and nuances as they navigated between the interplay of conventional gender norms and the changing circumstances of women's experiences (Smith-Rosenberg, 1985).

From an economic standpoint, the *fin de siècle* era initiated the initial stages of women's increased participation in diverse professional domains so women "began to demand radical changes equal employment opportunities, equal pay for equal work" (Warner & Kessler-Harris, 1983). However, it is important to note that they frequently encountered substantial wage discrepancies and were predominantly engaged in occupations of lower remuneration and lesser prestige when compared to their male counterparts. The economic involvement of women, specifically in urban regions, played a key part in challenging the prevailing perception of women's economic dependence on men (Warner & Kessler-Harris, 1983).

The manifestation of the interconnectedness between gender and other social categories such as race, class and ethnicity was notably conspicuous within the framework of inequity. Women belonging to marginalized racial and ethnic groups, as well as those hailing from economically disadvantaged backgrounds, encountered intersecting forms of discrimination that were distinct from the experiences and concerns of white women from middle-class backgrounds. The suffrage movement has been subject to criticism due to its perceived lack of inclusivity and failure to adequately address the unique needs and rights of women of color because "after the passage of the 19th Amendment, black women found themselves abandoned" (Terborg-Penn, 1998).

Also, during the fin de siècle period, there existed specific distinctions in the perception and pursuit of the American Dream between men and women, which were influenced by the prevailing gender dynamics and social constraints of the era. These variations were evident in the differing ways in which men and women interpreted and sought after the ideals of freedom, opportunity, and prosperity associated with the American Dream. The American Dream, as perceived by men, frequently represents the attainment of economic prosperity, political influence and social advancement. On the other hand, the aspirations of women were often restricted by societal norms and legal constraints, resulting in a unique gendered interpretation of the American Dream.

Considerable insights into the gendered dynamics at play can be gained from the literary and cultural depictions of the American Dream that emerged during this era. Feminist authors such as Charlotte Perkins Gilman and Kate Chopin portrayed the challenges and ambitions of women in a patriarchal society through their literary works. Gilman's works, including her landmark short story *The Yellow Wallpaper*, highlighted the psychological and social constraints placed on women, challenging the notion that the American Dream was equally accessible to all.

These cultural representations were significant in challenging the traditional narratives of the American Dream. While the dream was conventionally depicted as attainable through hard work and determination, these literary works exposed the additional barriers faced by women due to their gender. The economic aspects of the American Dream were particularly elusive for women, as they often faced wage discrimination and limited job opportunities compared to men (Warner & Kessler-Harris, 1983).

Furthermore, major social reform movements, such as the suffrage movement, which fundamentally challenged the conventional conception of the American Dream, flourished during the fin de siècle. In addition to demanding political equality, the suffragists' struggle for voting rights posed a broader challenge to the outdated gender-based assumptions of the American Dream. The eventual success of

this movement, culminating in the ratification of the Nineteenth Amendment in 1920, marked a significant step towards redefining the American Dream to include women's rights and aspirations (Flexner, 1996).

The feminist movements of the *fin de siècle* established the foundation for the fight for gender equality that continues to this day. The initial movements, characterized by their emphasis on suffrage, labor rights and educational reforms, instigated a gradual dismantling of the inflexible gender norms prevalent during the Victorian era. This on-going struggle has since undergone transformations and persists in diverse manifestations in contemporary society. Modern feminist movements derive advantages from the strategies, ideological foundations and endeavors towards equality in both public and private domains that were established during the *fin de siècle*. The incorporation of inclusivity and intersectionality within contemporary feminism can be perceived as a reaction to the constraints and prejudices prevalent in prior feminist movements. These earlier movements primarily focused on the perspectives of affluent women, thereby neglecting the varied experiences of women from racial minority backgrounds, lower socioeconomic statuses and other marginalized communities.

The *fin de siècle* era offered a gendered interpretation of the American Dream, with social and legal restrictions frequently impeding women's ability to pursue it. Throughout history, there has been a discernible transformation in this viewpoint, with more modern interpretations placing increased importance on the relevance of gender equality within the framework of the American Dream. Presently, ongoing efforts to promote reproductive rights, equal pay and the eradication of gender-based violence are perceived as a perpetuation of the American Dream, striving to ensure that it remains accessible and all-encompassing for everybody regardless of gender. Also, modern feminist theory critiques internalized gender norms, body politics and gender social construction to better understand gender inequality (Butler, 1990).

Due to the unavailability of a succinct table delineating the similarities and advancements of feminism, gender equality and the American Dream observed

between the fin de siècle period and the contemporary era, we created one that provides a comprehensive overview of it.

Aspect	Fin de Siècle Era	Present Day
Feminist Movements	Focus on suffrage, labour rights, educational reforms	More inclusivity and intersectionality, addressing a broader range of issues
Gender Equality	Start of breaking down Victorian gender norms, restricted reach	Persistent struggle against gender norms, heightened emphasis on inclusivity and diversity
The American Dream	Gendered interpretation, limited accessibility for women	Expanded to include gender equality, recognizing diverse experiences
Economic Participation	Emergence of women in workforce, often in lower-paying jobs	Still striving for breaking barriers and getting equal pay in many fields
Societal Changes	Shift in societal perspectives on women's roles, limited inclusivity	Efforts to redefine gender roles in society, increased awareness of intersectionality

Table 1

So, the fin de siècle era marked a notable breakpoint in the progression of feminist movements, the endeavor for gender equality and the comprehension of the American Dream. This era initiated a process of fundamental shift that still holds relevance in present-day society. Revolutionary efforts to promote suffrage, labor rights and educational reforms were hallmarks of the feminist movements that arose at this time. These efforts posed a significant challenge to the constricting gender norms prevalent during the Victorian era, thereby establishing a solid foundation for

the contemporary feminist movement. Even though the early movements were not entirely inclusive and intersectional, they were vital in creating the groundwork for the complex and varied feminist discourses that exist today. These contemporary discourses aim to tackle a wider range of issues that cut across various social categories. The transformation of the American Dream, transitioning from a concept influenced by gendered norms to one that embraces and prioritizes gender equality, reflects corresponding changes within society. Hence, the legacy of the feminist movements of the fin de siècle is demonstrated not only by the legislative and social progress they made, but also by the ongoing and developing conversation about intersectionality, gender equality and the pursuit of a more inclusive and equitable American Dream. This demonstrates a dynamic and continuous process of societal self-reflection and improvement.

2.2. Female Characters and Their Complex Roles in Pursuit of the American Dream

2.2.1. Edna Pontellier: The Quest for Identity Beyond Social Conventions

Taking into consideration the previously mentioned historical context of the fin de siècle as a time of significant change, Kate Chopin's literary works provide a subtle extension of this examination, specifically in her portrayal of women's encounters in connection to the progressing American Dream. A lot of social and cultural changes happened at the same time as her writing, especially in the South after the Civil War. The author's literary works exhibit a profound correlation with notions of personal autonomy and identity, which hold significant prominence within the concept of the American Dream.

Raised in St. Louis, Missouri, Kate Chopin (born Katherine O'Flaherty in 1850) was greatly influenced by the culture of the city in her later works. Her

experiences in Louisiana, a state recovering from the Civil War and rich in its own cultural legacy, provided an extensive background for her stories, which explored the expectations and roles that society placed on women, “Women were expected to have babies, but not ideas...” (Toth, 1999, p. 128).

Chopin’s literary output, notably prominent during the 1890s, includes a diverse range of short stories and two novels, with *The Awakening* (1899) standing out as her most highly regarded piece of work. With a backdrop of a society still largely governed by Victorian ideals, her narratives conveyed a growing awareness among women regarding their individual rights and desires.

This story, which was published in 1899, takes place within the distinct context of late nineteenth-century Creole society in Louisiana. The setting serves as a significant element in portraying the specific cultural environment, where traditional Creole values intersect with the broader societal shifts occurring during that period. Chopin captures the relaxed pace, social rituals and unique customs that govern the lives of the Creole elite by placing the story in the colorful backdrops of New Orleans and Grand Isle.

Focusing on the main character, Edna Pontellier, this work bravely explores ideas of female independence and sexual expression. Following its initial publication, the novel faced major criticism for its depiction of Edna’s rebellion against established societal conventions, specifically concerning her sexuality and refusal to adhere to traditional maternal responsibilities. Edna’s actions, during the late 19th century, were perceived by critics who adhered to Victorian values as transgressions against the era’s inflexible gender roles and moral principles. Consequently, her choices were met with unfavorable reception and sparked controversy. However, the novel later garnered recognition for its groundbreaking influence on feminist literature, providing a perceptive analysis of the social mores that impose restrictions on women.

The character of Edna Pontellier is introduced in *The Awakening* as someone who defies social conventions to go on a journey of self-discovery and find her true

self. This transformation takes place in a society where the American Dream is conventionally characterized by reaching the state of material prosperity, devotion to family values and societal recognition. These are aspects that Edna, on the surface, appears to possess but ultimately discovers are unfulfilling.

From her first appearance, Edna is presented through the lens of her husband's perception, reflecting the societal view of women as possessions. Léonce Pontellier looks at his wife "as one looks at a valuable piece of personal property which has suffered some damage" (Chopin, 2016, p. 4) when he comments on her sunburn. This analogy sets the tone for Edna's initial role as an object rather than an individual in her marriage, indicating her lack of autonomy and personal identity at this stage.

Although the next description of her "strong, shapely" hands, "She held up her hands, strong, shapely hands, and surveyed them critically, drawing up her fawn sleeves above the wrists" (Chopin, 2016, p. 4-5), alludes to Edna's growing sense of personal strength and her ability to shape her own destiny since hands often symbolize agency and capacity for action. This contrasts with the scene where her life seems largely dictated by Léonce's expectations. So, this action is more than just a physical observation; it reflects her growing recognition of her own potential and powers.

Moreover, looking at hands "reminded her of her rings, which she had given to her husband before leaving for the beach" action (Chopin, 2016, p. 5). In this situation, the rings serve as a powerful symbol. Edna giving her rings to her husband before going to the beach can be seen as a moment of distancing herself from the traditional bonds and expectations of marriage. The rings, often representing marital commitment, in this act, become symbols of the constraints and roles that Edna is beginning to question. By giving these rings to her husband, she is temporarily releasing herself from these societal expectations, which gives her the freedom to find out who she is outside of her marriage.

Edna's further growing disconnection from her husband becomes evident when she shows disinterest in his life. Léonce's realization, "He thought it very

discouraging that his wife, who was the sole object of his existence, evinced so little interest in things which concerned him, and valued so little his conversation,” suggests a growing rift between them (Chopin, 2016, p. 11). This detachment is not solely a personal issue but also symbolizes Edna's burgeoning discontent with the traditional roles relegated to women, roles she is expected to fulfill as part of the American Dream.

A deeper insight into Edna's internal struggle is revealed following a confrontation with her husband over her perceived negligence towards their children. “The tears came so fast to Mrs. Pontellier's eyes... Such experiences as the foregoing were not uncommon in her married life” (Chopin, 2016, p. 14). This moment of vulnerability serves to emphasize her perception of being trapped and discontent, signifying the early phases of her journey towards self-awareness. It is described as “An indescribable oppression, which seemed to generate in some unfamiliar part of her consciousness, filled her whole being with a vague anguish” (Chopin, 2016, p. 14-15). It indicates an internal awakening, where Edna begins to recognize the disparity between her true self and the role she has been conditioned to play.

As the narrator later continues with the description of how the Pontellier children react to adversity, “he was not apt to rush crying to his mother's arms for comfort; he would more likely pick himself up, wipe the water out of his eyes and the sand out of his mouth, and go on playing” (Chopin, 2016, p. 18), it becomes clear that there is an emotional distance between Edna and her children. This behavior differs from the expected maternal relationship of the time, where a mother would be the primary source of comfort. The children's independence and self-reliance are reflective of Edna's somewhat detached parenting style.

Edna's deviation from this idealized role is underscored in the line, “In short, Mrs. Pontellier was not a mother-woman” (Chopin, 2016, p. 19). This statement is a clear declaration of Edna's nonconformity to the prevailing maternal archetype. The “mother-women” are described as those who “idolized their children, worshiped their husbands, and esteemed it a holy privilege to efface themselves as individuals and

grow wings as ministering angels” (Chopin, 2016, p. 19). Edna’s inability or unwillingness to fully immerse herself in these roles points to her inner conflict and desire for personal identity beyond her familial obligations.

As the story unfolds, Edna’s evolving consciousness becomes a huge part of her transformation. The metaphor of a dawning light, “A certain light was beginning to dawn dimly within her, – the light which, showing the way, forbids it”, (Chopin, 2016, p. 33) beautifully captures the onset of Edna’s awakening. However, this light is paradoxical – while it illuminates a path to self-discovery, it also reveals the barriers and societal constraints that inhibit her journey, hence “showing the way, forbids it” (Chopin, 2016, p. 33).

The narrator further elaborates, “In short, Mrs. Pontellier was beginning to realize her position in the universe as a human being, and to recognize her relations as an individual to the world within and about her” (Chopin, 2016, p. 33). This realization represents a significant shift from her previously accepted identity as merely a wife and mother. Edna is starting to perceive herself as an individual with her own desires and aspirations, separate from the roles dictated by society.

Edna Pontellier’s journey of self-discovery is deeply intertwined with her evolving understanding of her sexuality. Her early unrequited infatuations and a marriage described as an “accident, in this respect resembling many other marriages which masquerade as the decrees of Fate” (Chopin, 2016, p. 46) highlight her initial conformity to societal expectations of sexuality. However, Edna’s perspective on her sexual identity shifts as she develops a sense of autonomy, and she realizes that her desires are fundamental to who she is.

The awakening of Edna’s consciousness is further stimulated through her exposure to art and music, serving as catalysts for her emotional and intellectual liberation. When Mademoiselle Reisz plays the piano, Edna experiences a visceral reaction, “The very first chords...sent a keen tremor down Mrs. Pontellier’s spinal column” (Chopin, 2016, p. 66). The emotions evoked by Mademoiselle Reisz’s piano playing stir a deep longing for personal expression. “She saw no pictures of solitude,

of hope, of longing, or of despair. But the very passions themselves were aroused within her soul” (Chopin, 2016, p. 66). This moment signals the awakening of Edna’s latent desires and individuality that were suppressed by society and her devotion to husband.

Also, learning to swim emerges as a key moment and a pivotal metaphor for Edna’s journey toward independence. “But that night she was like the little tottering, stumbling, clutching child, who of a sudden realizes its powers, and walks for the first time alone, boldly and with over-confidence” (Chopin, 2016, p. 70). This newfound skill symbolizes her breaking free from the constraints of her previously sheltered life and her desire to explore uncharted territories. “She wanted to swim far out, where no woman had swum before” (Chopin, 2016, p. 70-71). The act of swimming, especially her desire to go further than others, reflects her internal quest to explore the depths of her identity and desires.

Edna’s first real confrontation happens when she defies her husband’s command to come to bed which becomes a significant act of rebellion against her conventional role since she always “had submitted to his command” (Chopin, 2016, p. 80).

Upon her family’s return from Grand Isle, Edna’s transformation becomes more pronounced. Her decision to abandon the traditional Tuesday reception, a symbol of societal obligation, signifies her detachment from social conventions. Léonce’s query, “Why, what could have taken you out on Tuesday? What did you have to do?” (Chopin, 2016, p. 130) and his expectation of a “suitable excuse” (Chopin, 2016, p. 130) for Edna’s absence reflect expectations laid on women to adhere to certain social protocols, and any deviation was viewed with suspicion or disapproval. Edna’s defiant response, “No, I left no excuse. I told Joe to say I was out, that was all”, (Chopin, 2016, p. 130) symbolizes a subtle rebellion against the strictures of her prescribed. This act of defiance, though small, signifies a major shift in Edna’s attitude towards her life and marriage.

Léonce's remark that "we've got to observe les convenances if we ever expect to get on and keep up with the procession" (Chopin, 2016, p. 130) emphasizes that only abidance to social norms could guarantee the achieving of the American dream. Although the story provides a more complex interpretation of this dream through Edna's character, one that prioritizes identity, self-actualization and personal fulfillment over monetary gain.

Also, a powerful contrast to the male-centric narratives of the American Dream that were popular during the fin de siècle is provided by Edna Pontellier's journey, "But whatever came, she had resolved never again to belong to another than herself" (Chopin, 2016, p. 208). The societal norms that governed a woman's existence through her relationships with men, whether as a wife, mother or daughter, are directly challenged by this declaration of self-ownership and autonomy.

Additionally, Edna Pontellier's visits to Mademoiselle Reisz play a crucial role in her journey of self-discovery and emotional liberation. Mademoiselle Reisz, with her unique personality and divine art, provides a sanctuary for Edna, a place where she can escape the pressures of her everyday life and experience a sense of freedom. As the narrator explains, "There was nothing which so quieted the turmoil of Edna's senses as a visit to Mademoiselle Reisz. It was then, in the presence of that personality which was offensive to her, that the woman, by her divine art, seemed to reach Edna's spirit and set it free" (Chopin, 2016, p. 204).

The start of Edna Pontellier's affair with Alcée Arobin triggered her exploration of self, particularly in terms of her sexuality and autonomy. This relationship is characterized by a passion and authenticity starkly different from her marriage. The moment they kiss, the narrator describes, "When he leaned forward and kissed her, she clasped his head, holding his lips to hers. It was the first kiss of her life to which her nature had really responded. It was a flaming torch that kindled desire" (Chopin, 2016, p. 218). This description of their kiss as the first to which her nature truly responded indicates a profound awakening within Edna, a realization of her own sexual desires and needs that had been hidden or unacknowledged in her life

with Léonce. While her marriage is dutiful and devoid of passion, her affair with Arobin is fueled by genuine attraction and mutual desire. This is further highlighted when the narrator observes, “Arobin’s manner was so genuine that it often deceived even himself” (Chopin, 2016, p. 201). This authenticity in Arobin’s feelings and their mutual attraction signifies a depth and intensity in their relationship, offering Edna a taste of true passion and emotional connection.

Edna’s move to the pigeon house symbolizes her pursuit of independence and her pursuit of independence and a disconnection from oppressive “large, double cottage” (Chopin, 2016, p. 127) where her husband was dominant and from traditional societal roles. This transition reflects a significant step away from the conventional expectations associated with the American Dream because “There was with her a feeling of having descended in the social scale, with a corresponding sense of having risen in the spiritual” (Chopin, 2016, p. 245). Edna’s choice reflects a deliberate rejection of the materialistic and status-driven aspects of the American Dream. She embraces a more introspective and spiritually fulfilling path, choosing personal growth over social approval.

Edna’s affinity for the pigeon house, “The pigeon house pleased her. It at once assumed the intimate character of a home”, (Chopin, 2016, p. 245) represents more than just a change of residence. It embodies her desire for a personal space where she can explore her identity free from societal constraints. The house's transformation into a home under her influence, “while she herself invested it with a charm which it reflected like a warm glow” (Chopin, 2016, p. 245), signifies Edna’s agency in redefining her life and surroundings according to her desires, a stark contrast to the life she led in her marital home.

Edna’s reunion with Robert and their mutual confession of love bring her inner turmoil to a climax. However, Robert’s message, “I love you. Good-bye – because I love you” (Chopin, 2016, p. 302), is a powerful testament to the intensity of his feelings for Edna, yet it simultaneously signifies the insurmountable obstacles that their relationship faces. Robert’s departure, despite his love for Edna, underscores the

societal constraints and personal conflicts that prevent their relationship from flourishing. His decision to leave, based on his love for her, suggests recognition of the impossibility of their situation given the social mores of the time, especially regarding marital fidelity and the sanctity of the family unit.

In her final act, Edna returns to the sea, the site of her first taste of freedom, to end her life. This touching act contrasts her initial empowering swim with a tragic surrender, symbolizing her ultimate escape from societal limitations. “A quick vision of death smote her soul, and for a second of time appalled and enfeebled her senses” (Chopin, 2016, p. 72). The sea, once a symbol of her awakening and freedom, becomes the medium of her final liberation from an oppressive society. This action may be interpreted as a sorrowful culmination and a symbolic demonstration of ultimate resistance against the societal limitations that impede women’s pursuit of the American Dream.

Nevertheless, within present-day scholarship, Edna Pontellier’s character has undergone a revision and is frequently acclaimed as an early proponent of feminist ideology. Contemporary scholars acknowledge the groundbreaking nature of Chopin’s work, as it presents an enormous opposition to the conventional women’s portrayals in both literary and societal contexts. Current perspectives recognize Edna as a complicated character whose challenges serve as a representation of broader concerns pertaining to women’s independence and identity. The observed change in perception can be seen as a reflection of evolving societal perspectives on gender roles and the advancement of women’s rights throughout the last century (Walker, 2000).

So, the change in Edna Pontellier’s character in Kate Chopin’s *The Awakening* from the time it was first published to the present day shows how feminist ideas and societal views on women’s independence are shifting. Edna’s character was initially criticized for questioning Victorian social norms but she now represents feminism awakening and the fight for women’s rights and self-identity. As a result of this change from condemnation to celebration, more people in culture and academia are

realizing how complicated and nuanced women's pursuit of autonomy and fulfillment can be. It is important to consider how historical texts contribute to the discussion of feminist ideals and gender equality when examining them again. Although Edna's character was controversial at first, now it represents how far we have come in understanding and appreciating the complex nature of the female experience and its central place in the larger story of the American Dream and the emergence of feminism (Toth, 1999; Walker, 2000). Critical reception changes like this show how literary interpretation is fluid and how societal views on women's roles change over time, both in literature and in real life.

2.2.2. Mademoiselle Reisz: The Embodiment of Artistic Rebellion and Independence

In *The Awakening*, an exceptional viewpoint on the American Dream is presented through the portrayal of the character Mademoiselle Reisz. She adopts the role of a representative figure during a significant era of transformation. Her character actively challenges established societal norms and plays an integral part in reshaping the understanding of personal fulfillment and success.

Mademoiselle Reisz's first appearance at a soirée on Grand Isle sets the tone for her character's substantial impact on the novel's narrative. When Robert asks Edna, "Would you like to hear Mademoiselle Reisz play?" (Chopin, 2016, p. 63), this seemingly simple inquiry introduces an important figure in Edna's life and foreshadows the deep connection that will develop between the two women.

Her physical description and manner further accentuate her uniqueness in the context of the societal norms of the time. Described as "a disagreeable little woman, no longer young" with "a small weazened face and body and eyes that glowed" (Chopin, 2016, p. 64), Mademoiselle Reisz contrasts with conventional notions of

feminine beauty and behaviour. Later in the novel the narrator adds that “She had been a little bewildered upon rising, or rather, descending from her cushions” (Chopin, 2016, p. 233) and highlights her physical fragility. This physical aspect contrasts with her strong personality and presence, underscoring the divergence often present in her character.

Moreover, Mademoiselle Reisz’s temperament is marked by a strong sense of confidence and a tendency to be at odds with others, as indicated by the narrator’s remark that she had “quarreled with almost every one, owing to a temper which was self-assertive and a disposition to trample upon the rights of others” (Chopin, 2016, p. 64). Moreover, her disposition to challenge and even disregard the rights of others can be interpreted as a reflection of her deep commitment to personal authenticity. Mademoiselle Reisz’s unwavering character represents the fight for individual freedom and self-expression in a society that places tight restrictions on women’s behavior.

Furthermore, Mademoiselle Reisz’s character embodies both emotional depth and artistic brilliance. Her piano playing immediately resonates with Edna, demonstrating the ability of art to evoke strong emotional reactions. The narrator captures this impact vividly, “The very first chords which Mademoiselle Reisz struck upon the piano sent a keen tremor down Mrs. Pontellier’s spinal column” (Chopin, 2016, p. 66). The narrator notes that it is not Edna’s first experience listening to a piano artist, but implies a newfound readiness in Edna to be deeply affected, “Perhaps it was the first time she was ready, perhaps the first time her being was tempered to take an impress of the abiding truth” (Chopin, 2016, p. 66). This suggests that Edna is at a point in her life where she is open to new experiences and emotions, and Mademoiselle Reisz’s music serves as a catalyst for this awakening.

When Mademoiselle Reisz “arose, and bowing her stiff, lofty bow, she went away, stopping for neither thanks nor applause” (Chopin, 2016, p. 66), it reinforced her image as an artist who is not concerned with external validation or approval, but rather with the integrity and truth of her art.

As Mademoiselle Reisz “passed along the gallery she patted Edna upon the shoulder” (Chopin, 2016, p. 66) which signified simple yet significant interaction with Edna. This gesture, seemingly small, symbolizes recognition and perhaps an unspoken understanding between the two women. It highlights a moment of connection, suggesting that Mademoiselle Reisz sees something in Edna that others do not – a kindred spirit or a shared sense of longing and desire for something more than the confines of their societal roles.

Mademoiselle’s direct and genuine connection with Edna further reveals her character’s depth. After her performance, she immediately asks Edna, “Well, how did you like my music?” (Chopin, 2016, p. 67) and recognizes the sincerity of Edna’s emotional response. Her comment, “You are the only one worth playing for. Those others? Bah!” (Chopin, 2016, p. 67) displays her disregard for superficial appreciation and her value for authentic emotional connection.

In addition, the metaphor of the mockingbird helps to further reveal Mademoiselle Reisz’s personality. As the narrator states, “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, 2016, p. 1). Similar to the mockingbird, she is unrestricted by the expectations and social mores of her era. Mademoiselle Reisz, being an unmarried and childless woman, embodies a symbol of autonomy, challenging the conventional societal expectations imposed upon women during the *fin de siècle* period. Within a social context where women frequently defined themselves in relation to their roles as wives and mothers, the decision to reject marriage and childbearing represents a significant expression of independence, comparable to the freedom exhibited by a mockingbird in its ability to sing its unique melody. Like a mockingbird that does not have to worry about what other birds think of it, Mademoiselle Reisz lives a life of artistic integrity and self-reliance.

When Edna and Mademoiselle Reisz met again on the beach, the old woman’s “Do you miss your friend greatly?” (Chopin, 2016, p. 117) cut to the core of Edna’s feelings. This question shows Mademoiselle Reisz’s keen awareness of Edna’s

emotional state and her ability to address deep matters in a direct yet sensitive manner. It is a question that resonates with Edna's inner turmoil, as the narrator notes, "the woman seemed to echo the thought which was ever in Edna's mind; or, better, the feeling which constantly possessed her" (Chopin, 2016, p. 117).

Her response to Edna's question about bathing, "Why should I go down to bathe at the very end of the season when I haven't been in the surf all summer," replied the woman, disagreeably" (Chopin, 2016, p. 123), demonstrates a certain bluntness and perhaps a disdain for conventional leisure activities. This response, coupled with the mention of her aversion to water, often attributed to either her false hair or an artistic temperament, adds a layer of complexity to her character. People were left to guess why she avoided water, hinting at the fact that society knew nothing about her which was surprising during that time because the Creole people knew everything about each other.

Mademoiselle Reisz's offering "Edna some chocolates in a paper bag, which she took from her pocket, by way of showing that she bore no ill feeling" (Chopin, 2016, p. 123), is a gesture that indicates a certain warmth and thoughtfulness underneath her outwardly brusque manner. Her explanation that she eats chocolates for their "sustaining quality" and her critical comment on Madame Lebrun's table add a touch of practicality and critical judgment to her personality (The Project Gutenberg eBook of *The Awakening and Selected Short Stories*, by Kate Chopin, 2021, February 28).

In the conversation about the Lebrun family, Mademoiselle Reisz's laughter and her comments, "Her favorite son! Oh, dear! Who could have been imposing such a tale upon you?" (Chopin, 2016, p. 124) and her remarks about Victor, "That Victor! hanging would be too good for him" (Chopin, 2016, p. 124), reveal a candid and somewhat cynical view of people. She does not hesitate to express her opinions, even if they are harsh or critical.

Mademoiselle Reisz helps Edna not only in discovery of her true self but also in understanding her feelings and desires. Edna's internal reaction after Reisz's

mentioning Mariequita as a person Robert beat his brother for, as she “looked down at Mademoiselle Reisz and wondered how she could have listened to her venom so long” (Chopin, 2016, p. 125), indicates her yet hidden jealousy. So, Mademoiselle Reisz often serves as a catalyst in the novel, provoking and revealing Edna’s hidden emotions and dreams.

Despite Edna’s apparent wish for solitude, “She remained a long time in the water, half hoping that Mademoiselle Reisz would not wait for her” (Chopin, 2016, p. 126), Mademoiselle Reisz does wait, showing a level of attachment towards Edna. Her behavior changes after the swim, she becomes amiable and complimentary, “She was very amiable during the walk back, and raved much over Edna’s appearance in her bathing suit” (Chopin, 2016, p. 126).

Additionally, Mademoiselle Reisz’s interest in continuing their acquaintance, as seen when she says, “She hoped that Edna would go to see her in the city, and wrote her address with the stub of a pencil on a piece of card which she found in her pocket” (Chopin, 2016, p. 126), show a desire for companionship and connection, despite her often disagreeable façade.

Finally, Mademoiselle Reisz’s comment about the summer, “rather pleasant, if it hadn’t been for the mosquitoes and the Farival twins” (Chopin, 2016, p. 126), adds a touch of dry humor and sarcasm to her personality that is shown as straightforward and direct.

Despite their last uncomfortable encounter, Edna’s interest in Mademoiselle Reisz persists even after she leaves for home, demonstrating the allure of Mademoiselle Reisz’s personality and talent. Edna recalls the “rather disagreeable impression left upon her by their last interview” (Chopin, 2016, p. 151), yet she is drawn to Mademoiselle Reisz, especially “to listen while she played upon the piano” (Chopin, 2016, p. 151). The striking contrast in Edna’s emotions demonstrates both the fundamental impact of Mademoiselle Reisz’s music and the fascinating depth of her personality. It represents an awakening within Edna, a realization of the opportunities that lie outside the confines of her current reality. In Mademoiselle

Reisz, Edna sees not just an artist but a symbol of what it means to live authentically, regardless of societal judgment.

When Edna tries to find Mademoiselle Reisz, she learns a lot about the other people's opinion toward the old woman's personality. The grocery store owner's comments that "he knew Mademoiselle Reisz a good deal better than he wanted to know her... the most disagreeable and unpopular woman who ever lived in Bienville Street" (Chopin, 2016, p. 152), reflect a general dislike or discomfort with Mademoiselle Reisz among her neighbours. This attitude is also echoed in Edna's interactions with others, like Madame Ratignolle, who is "on the most distant terms with the musician, and preferred to know nothing concerning her" (Chopin, 2016, p. 152-153). It highlights the divide between Mademoiselle Reisz's public persona, characterized by unpopularity, and her private impact, particularly on Edna, who finds something deeply compelling and transformative in her music and presence.

The moment Edna finally finds Mademoiselle Reisz, the first thing she pays her attention to is the place where the pianist lives. The choice of an apartment "up under the roof", ostensibly to "discourage the approach of beggars, peddlars and callers" (Chopin, 2016, p. 160), suggests a desire for privacy and perhaps a detachment from the conventional social world. The windows, "for the most part dingy, but as they were nearly always open it did not make so much difference" (Chopin, 2016, p. 160), indicate a practical approach to her living space, prioritizing function over aesthetic. This practicality is further emphasized by her tolerance of "a good deal of smoke and soot" (Chopin, 2016, p. 160) to ensure light and air enter her room. Such descriptions mirror Mademoiselle Reisz's character, which prioritizes substance and authenticity over appearances.

The presence of "a magnificent piano" (Chopin, 2016, p. 160) crowding the apartment signifies not just her passion for music but also how this passion dominates her life, much more than material comfort or domestic order. This prioritization reflects her dedication to her art, suggesting that her identity and fulfillment are

deeply intertwined with her music. So, her living space, with its practicality and simplicity mirrors her independent, art-centric and unconventional approach to life.

Moreover, after their first meeting outside Grand Isle, Mademoiselle Reisz becomes a letter keeper. Her decision to let Edna read Robert's letter, despite initially hesitating, signifies her role in maintaining and even nurturing the emotional connection between Edna and Robert. Her remark, "Though the letter might as well have been sent to you; it was nothing but Mrs. Pontellier from beginning to end" (Chopin, 2016, p. 163), highlights that Robert's thoughts are significantly focused on Edna, thereby sustaining Edna's feelings and interest in Robert. In doing so, Mademoiselle Reisz plays a critical role in the development of their relationship, acting as a conduit for their unspoken emotions and desires.

Mademoiselle Reisz's role as the keeper of Robert's letters and her decision to share them with Edna, despite his unawareness, "Never in the world! He would be angry and would never write to me again if he thought so" (Chopin, 2016, p. 209), reflects her understanding of and involvement in the complex emotional dynamics between Edna and Robert. Her response to Edna's question about why she shows the letters, "Haven't you begged for them? Can I refuse you anything? Oh! you cannot deceive me" (Chopin, 2016, p. 210), demonstrates a combination of empathy and complicity.

Mademoiselle becomes the first person to acknowledge Edna's and Robert's feelings, "It is because he loves you, poor fool, and is trying to forget you, since you are not free to listen to him or to belong to him" (Chopin, 2016, p. 210), she opens Edna's eyes to Robert's real reason to go to Mexico. Reisz becomes a catalyst for Edna's finally admitting to herself her love for Robert, "Are you in love with Robert? Yes" (Chopin, 2016, p. 212).

Additionally, Mademoiselle Reisz's role in Edna's transformation becomes apparent through the explicit advice and profound insights she imparts. She supports and mentors Edna as she sets out on her emotional and intellectual exploration, acting as a knowledgeable guide and a trusted advisor. This is evident when Mademoiselle

Reisz tells Edna, “The artist must possess the courageous soul... the soul that dares and defies” (Chopin, 2016, p. 165). The notion of possessing a “courageous soul” relates to the internal fortitude required to defy societal norms and constraints. Also, the expression “the soul that dares and defies” captures the essence of resistance against oppressive structures. It is a call to question established norms and demonstrate one’s unique identity.

The narrator’s further description of Mademoiselle’s impact on Edna, “There was nothing which so quieted the turmoil of Edna’s senses as a visit to Mademoiselle Reisz” (Chopin, 2016, p. 204), highlights that only with this woman Mrs. Pontellier can her true self without hiding her inner thoughts and emotions. Reisz’s apartment and later pigeon house become Edna’s sanctuaries, places where she avoids societal prejudices, meets Robert again and confesses her feelings to him for the first time.

Mademoiselle shows her care toward Edna when she exclaims “Ah! here comes the sunlight!” (Chopin, 2016, p. 205) and comments, “Now it will be warm and bright enough; I can let the fire alone” (Chopin, 2016, p. 205). Mademoiselle Reisz is the safe place for Edna while Mrs. Pontellier is the source of happiness for the old woman. When Mademoiselle notices that Edna is “cold; you look miserable” (Chopin, 2016, p. 205), she offers hot chocolate and the option of brandy, “The chocolate will soon be hot. But would you rather have a taste of brandy? I have scarcely touched the bottle which you brought me for my cold” (Chopin, 2016, p. 205). It shows her willingness to provide comfort and warmth to Edna, further emphasizing her nurturing qualities.

Also, Mademoiselle Reisz being the first to know about Edna’s decision to move, “Mademoiselle, I am going to move away from my house on Esplanade Street” (Chopin, 2016, p. 206), suggests that Edna sees her as a trusted and understanding figure. This trust likely stems from Mademoiselle Reisz’s reputation for being straightforward and unapologetically herself, qualities that Edna, in her own journey of self-discovery, finds appealing and inspiring.

Mademoiselle Reisz's response to Edna's reasons to move, "That is not your true reason, ma belle. There is no use in telling me lies. I don't know your reason, but you have not told me the truth" (Chopin, 2016, p. 207), demonstrates her ability to see beyond superficial explanations. Her insistence on honesty reveals her as someone who values authenticity, a trait that Edna appreciates given her own struggle against societal pretenses.

At some point, the old woman becomes a mother figure for Edna who reassures her when Mrs. Pontellier needs it. The gesture of Edna dragging "herself on her knees before Mademoiselle Reisz" (Chopin, 2016, p. 212), and Mademoiselle Reisz's response of taking "the glowing face between her two hands" (Chopin, 2016, p. 212) signifies a deep level of comfort and understanding between the two women. This moment of physical and emotional intimacy also indicates a notable level of trust and affection between Edna and Mademoiselle Reisz. Despite Mademoiselle Reisz's often abrasive exterior, Edna seeks solace and understanding in her company, implying that she recognizes and values the genuine care and support Mademoiselle Reisz offers.

In the dinner scene before Edna's move to the Pigeon House, Mademoiselle Reisz is depicted in a social setting where her character is not usually seen. Her participation in this gathering, "Mademoiselle Reisz arose with Monsieur Ratignolle, who offered to escort her to the car" (Chopin, 2016, p. 233), suggests a willingness to engage in this select and intimate gathering due to her personal connection to Mrs. Pontellier.

When Mademoiselle Reisz decides to leave, the affectionate gesture towards Edna, as she "kissed Edna upon the shoulder, and whispered: 'Bonne nuit, ma reine; soyez sage'" (Chopin, 2016, p. 233), implies a mix of affection, respect and a hint of protective advice, implying she realizes what is happening between Edna and Alcée.

At the end, Mademoiselle Reisz's apartment serves as the place where Robert and Edna meet. Unknowingly, the old woman connects Edna and Robert as her role

as the keeper of Robert's letters, which she shares with Edna, becomes the thread that keeps their emotional bond alive during his absence. Her home, characterized by its artistic environment and detachment from conventional societal norms, provides a neutral and discreet setting for them to meet.

In the climactic scene, where Edna Pontellier swims out to sea, her thoughts turning to Mademoiselle Reisz, "How Mademoiselle Reisz would have laughed, perhaps sneered, if she knew! 'And you call yourself an artist! What pretensions, Madame! The artist must possess the courageous soul that dares and defies'" (Chopin, 2016, p. 302), reveal a significant aspect of Mademoiselle Reisz's influence on Edna's final decision. Mrs. Pontellier understands now what the old woman meant when she tested her wings, they were not strong enough. Edna recognizes that while she will never achieve the same level of artistic and personal autonomy as Mademoiselle Reisz, her final act is a bold statement of self-determination, resonating with the courage and defiance that Mademoiselle advocates.

Within the scope of current feminist discourse, Mademoiselle Reisz is frequently acknowledged as a pioneering figure that embodies female empowerment and challenges prevailing patriarchal conventions. Scholars have commended her portrayal as a predecessor to the contemporary feminist movement, expressing admiration for her rejection of the conventional gender roles imposed on women during her era. Elaine Showalter, a renowned feminist critic, notes that characters such as Mademoiselle Reisz hold great importance in early feminist literature as they "challenge the traditional images and roles of women" (Showalter, 1977).

Besides, Doris Davis extensively examines the character of Mademoiselle Reisz in *The Enigma at the Keyboard: Chopin's Mademoiselle Reisz*, presenting her as an enigmatic and intriguing figure within the context of nineteenth-century American literature. According to Davis's analysis, it can be inferred that the character of Mademoiselle Reisz in Chopin's work embodies the author's personal aesthetic preferences and serves as a means to challenge the prevailing perception of female artists during the nineteenth century as being "unnatural" – "While Chopin

may be using Reisz's physical oddities for varied purposes, her descriptions seem informed, at least in part, by the nineteenth-century conception of women concert pianists as somehow unnatural" (Davis, 2004)

So, Mademoiselle Reisz in Kate Chopin's novel *The Awakening* symbolizes an important shift from the conventional ideals associated with the American Dream. Her character symbolizes artistic rebellion and independence thereby questioning the prevailing societal norms of the fin de siècle period. In contrast to the conventional notion of Dream centered around material success and societal conformity, the life of Mademoiselle Reisz, an unmarried and childless woman who devotes herself to her artistic pursuits, embodies an alternative aspiration that prioritizes personal fulfillment, autonomy and the expression of creativity. The influence she has on Edna Pontellier and her refusal to conform to social norms serve as a larger critique of the need to redefine the American Dream to incorporate the aspirations of women who seek independence and individuality. The depiction of Mademoiselle Reisz in early feminist literature and her continued relevance in contemporary feminist discourse highlight her importance as a representation of female empowerment and a critique of patriarchal norms. The struggles of modern women trying to find their place in a society in transition are reflected in Mademoiselle Reisz's life story, which shows that the "American Dream" is not a static ideal.

2.2.3. The Narrator of *The Yellow Wallpaper*: Madness as a Response to Oppression

One of the most influential figures of the fin de siècle, a time of rapid social and cultural change, was Charlotte Perkins Gilman, an eminent feminist and social reformer. Born into a time when women's roles were strictly confined to domestic spheres, Gilman's writings and advocacy were groundbreaking. The author's

narrative technique, exemplified in her works such as *The Yellow Wallpaper*, surpassed the conventional storytelling methods prevalent during her time, providing a thorough examination of the societal conventions that restricted women in terms of their physical and mental freedom. This story particularly, serves as a reflection of her own experiences with postpartum depression and the restrictive medical practices of the time (Paravantes, 2019).

Beyond her literary work, Gilman was also dedicated to social reform. She actively participated in multiple social movements that advocated for the rights of women and promoted societal transformation. In her work, *Women and Economics* (1898), she argued that women should not have to rely on men financially and instead should be able to support themselves, “To work to the full capacity of one's powers is necessary for human development – the full use of one's best faculties – this is the health and happiness for both man and woman” (Gilman, 1998). This fits in with her grander plan to reform society so that women have equal participation. Gilman’s work in this period was instrumental in shaping early feminist thought and continues to be influential in contemporary feminist discourse (Tuttle & Kessler, 2011).

In her writings, Gilman challenges stereotypical gender roles and promotes women’s autonomy, demonstrating her deep engagement with feminist themes and the American Dream. Going beyond the realm of fiction, *The Yellow Wallpaper* critiques the societal and psychological constraints imposed on women, thus reflecting the broader effort for autonomy that was central to the American Dream narrative of the time. This story that was published in 1892 becomes crucial for understanding the evolving concept of the American Dream, especially in the context of women’s rights and mental health during the transformative fin de siècle period.

The story begins with the unnamed narrator who writes in her journal entries that “It is very seldom that mere ordinary people like John and myself secure ancestral halls for the summer” (Gilman, 2018, p. 1). She is an upper-middle class woman who suffers from “temporary nervous depression” (Gilman, 2018, p. 1) as her husband states. This diagnosis captures the dominant attitudes towards women’s

mental health during the fin de siècle. This historical era continued to hold outdated perspectives on mental health, specifically when it came to women.

During the 19th century, the term “hysteria” was frequently employed to denote a diverse range of psychological manifestations observed in women, frequently associated with perceived inherent emotional volatility. Based on the patriarchal view, women were thought to be more likely to have mental disorders because of how their bodies and emotions were seen to be different from men’s. The term itself, originating from the Greek term for uterus, *hysteria*, highlights the gendered aspect of the diagnosis, linking women’s psychological well-being explicitly to their reproductive system, and consequently, their societal roles as wives and mothers.

John, her spouse, “is a physician of high standing” (Gilman, 2018, p. 1) and “practical in the extreme” (Gilman, 2018, p. 1) so the narrator does not argue with him about her diagnosis. The narrator writes in the journal that her “brother is also a physician, and also of high standing, and he says the same thing” (Gilman, 2018, p. 1) so she unquestioningly does everything that educated patriarchy in the family tells her.

Then the unnamed narrator discusses that she is “absolutely forbidden to “work” until I am well again” (Gilman, 2018, p. 1) meaning that she was prescribed a “rest cure” treatment. Her forced rest and “confinement” represent the limits many women faced at the time, showing the irony of the American Dream in a society that routinely denied these freedoms to half of the population.

Although at the beginning of the story, the narrator realizes that this treatment is not helpful, privately she critiques it. She writes, “Personally, I disagree with their ideas. Personally, I believe that congenial work, with excitement and change, would do me good” (Gilman, 2018, p. 1). Her clear disagreement reveals her critical thinking and self-awareness. The narrator’s belief that “congenial work, with excitement and change, would do me good” (Gilman, 2018, p. 1), implies a deep desire for intellectual stimulation and a meaningful connection with the world. This

desire stands in huge contrast to the passive and subdued role expected of her as a woman and a patient.

The narrator is depicted as a woman caught in a struggle between her own needs for self-expression and intellectual engagement, and the restrictive norms and expectations of her environment. This is evident in her hidden attempts to write, which she finds both necessary and exhausting due to the need for secrecy, “I did write for a while in spite of them; but it does exhaust me a good deal – having to be so sly about it, or else meet with heavy opposition” (Gilman, 2018, p. 1).

She also recognizes that her mental health might benefit from less opposition and more social interaction, indicating an awareness of what could potentially help her condition, “I sometimes fancy that in my condition if I had less opposition and more society and stimulus...” (Gilman, 2018, p. 1). However, this thought is quickly undercut by the dominant opinion of her husband, John, who believes that she should not focus on her condition. His dismissal of her feelings and needs exacerbates her sense of isolation and helplessness, “...but John says the very worst thing I can do is to think about my condition, and I confess it always makes me feel bad” (Gilman, 2018, p. 1).

Furthermore, the narrator pays a lot of attention to the description of the house they rented for summer. The building, described by the narrator as “a colonial mansion, a hereditary estate” (Gilman, 2018, p. 1), immediately conjures images of grandeur and history, something unusual for her. However, she injects a note of the mysterious and possibly sinister by playfully imagining it as “a haunted house” (Gilman, 2018, p. 1). This thought, while seemingly lighthearted, introduces a subtle foreshadowing of the mental entrapment and haunting she will experience, much like a woman trapped within the patterns of the yellow wallpaper who is the ghost that haunts this estate.

In her description of the house and its surroundings, the narrator acknowledges its beauty, writing, “The most beautiful place! It is quite alone, standing well back from the road, quite three miles from the village” (Gilman, 2018, p. 1), but the way

she emphasizes its isolation with phrases like “quite alone” subtly mirrors her own feelings of being isolated and cut off from the outside world.

Additionally, her intuitive sense that “there is something strange about the house – I can feel it” (Gilman, 2018, p. 1), coupled with John’s practical dismissal of her feelings, foreshadows the mental unraveling she will undergo. Just as she senses an unexplainable presence in the house, she becomes consumed by the presence of the imagined woman in the wallpaper, a projection of her own confinement and desperation.

Then she describes a room where she is supposed to spend the rest of the time. She begins by expressing her dissatisfaction with it, “I don’t like our room a bit. I wanted one downstairs that opened on the piazza and had roses all over the window, and such pretty old-fashioned chintz hangings! but John would not hear of it” (Gilman, 2018, p. 1).

John’s decision to choose the room they are in, based on practical reasons – “He said there was only one window and not room for two beds, and no near room for him if he took another” (Gilman, 2018, p. 1) – emphasizes the control he has over her life. His care for her, though described as “very careful and loving” (Gilman, 2018, p. 1), feels more like overprotection and control, leaving her with no autonomy, “hardly lets me stir without special direction” (Gilman, 2018, p. 1).

Her description of the wallpaper in the room is particularly telling of her mental state, “The paint and paper look as if a boys’ school had used it. It is stripped off – the paper – in great patches all around the head of my bed, about as far as I can reach, and in a great place on the other side of the room low down” (Gilman, 2018, p. 1). The wallpaper becomes an obsession for her, with its “sprawling flamboyant patterns committing every artistic sin” (Gilman, 2018, p. 1). She describes it as “dull enough to confuse the eye in following, pronounced enough to constantly irritate, and provoke study” (Gilman, 2018, p. 1), reflecting her own confused and irritated mental state.

The color of the wallpaper is particularly repulsive to her, “The color is repellant, almost revolting; a smouldering, unclean yellow, strangely faded by the slow-turning sunlight” (Gilman, 2018, p. 1). The repulsion she feels towards the wallpaper mirrors her feelings towards her own situation – trapped, controlled and fading away like the color of the wallpaper.

Then the narrator writes how she feels misunderstood and alone in her suffering, particularly by John. She says, “John does not know how much I really suffer. He knows there is no reason to suffer, and that satisfies him” (Gilman, 2018, p. 2). This reflects a disconnection between her experience and John’s perception of it. His dismissal of her feelings, thinking there is no “real” reason for her to suffer, adds to her sense of isolation and invalidation. She states that “Nobody would believe what an effort it is to do what little I am able – to dress and entertain, and order things” (Gilman, 2018, p. 2) meaning the lack of understanding and support she receives from those around her.

Subsequently, the narrator starts describing the symptoms of postpartum depression without realizing it, “It is fortunate Mary is so good with the baby. Such a dear baby! And yet I cannot be with him, it makes me so nervous” (Gilman, 2018, p. 2), even though this disease was not recognized in the DSM until 1994. Then she writes that “I get unreasonably angry with John sometimes. I’m sure I never used to be so sensitive” (Gilman, 2018, p. 2) adding even more reasons to call her disease as a postpartum depression.

Her state under the influence of postpartum depression and the lack of social interactions, “It is so discouraging not to have any advice and companionship” (Gilman, 2018, p. 2), progressively declines as a direct reaction to her surroundings. She asks her husband to leave the estate but he answers that “Of course if you were in any danger I could and would, but you really are better, dear, whether you can see it or not. I am a doctor, dear, and I know. You are gaining flesh and color, your appetite is better. I feel really much easier about you” (Gilman, 2018, p. 4). He gaslights everything his wife says even after she replies that “I don’t weigh a bit more... nor as

much; and my appetite may be better in the evening, when you are here, but it is worse in the morning when you are away” (Gilman, 2018, p. 4).

Later on, as she finds herself confined within the walls of a room adorned with oppressive yellow wallpaper, her fixation upon it intensifies progressively. The depression begins to turn into psychosis. She puts in her journal that “There are things in that paper that nobody knows but me, or ever will” (Gilman, 2018, p. 3). From a psychological standpoint, the experience of being confined and the absence of intellectual stimulation serve to intensify her condition, resulting in a heightened engagement with her delusions.

The wallpaper serves as a visual representation of her internal distress, wherein its complex patterns serve as a metaphor for the intricate and chaotic nature of her psychological condition. The emphasis placed on the wallpaper exemplifies a prevalent occurrence observed in psychological disorders, wherein individuals may exhibit a tendency to become preoccupied with specific objects or concepts. This fixation frequently serves as a coping mechanism to alleviate their psychological distress.

When she becomes hyper-fixated on the wallpaper, she turns into a complete psychopath because she starts to reject the outside world and does not want to leave this room anymore, saying “I don’t want to go outside. I won’t, even if Jennie asks me to. For outside you have to creep on the ground, and everything is green instead of yellow” (Gilman, 2018, p. 6).

As her condition deteriorates, the difference between objective reality and her perceptual distortions becomes increasingly indistinct. The narrator states, “I didn’t realize for a long time what the thing was that showed behind, – that dim sub-pattern, – but now I am quite sure it is a woman” (Gilman, 2018, p. 4). This hallucination serves as an embodiment of her broken identity, with the “woman” behind the pattern representing her inner self, who is stuck and fighting against societal norms. The things she desires but does not allow herself to have are reflected in the wallpaper, which stands for the boundaries of her own mind and life.

During the climactic moment, her sense of connection with the female figure depicted in the wallpaper reaches its culmination as she declares, “I've got out at last... And I've pulled off most of the paper, so you can't put me back!” (Gilman, 2018, p. 6). The act of tearing down the wallpaper symbolizes her resistance against the repressive systems that restricted her, both physically and mentally. This moment signifies her psychological deterioration, yet paradoxically embodies a distorted view of emancipation. The narrator's act of defying the wallpaper serves as a symbolic gesture of resistance against the societal and domestic limitations that have contributed to her psychological deterioration.

Doubtless, the portrayal of the narrator's life severely contrasts the ideals encapsulated in the American Dream. Gilman's story is a critique of the societal norms that made this Dream unreachable for women of her time. The narrator's descent into madness, exacerbated by oppressive domestic confines, symbolizes the broader struggle of women against patriarchal structures. This depiction highlights the inaccessibility of the American Dream within a society that systematically denies women their autonomy and aspirations.

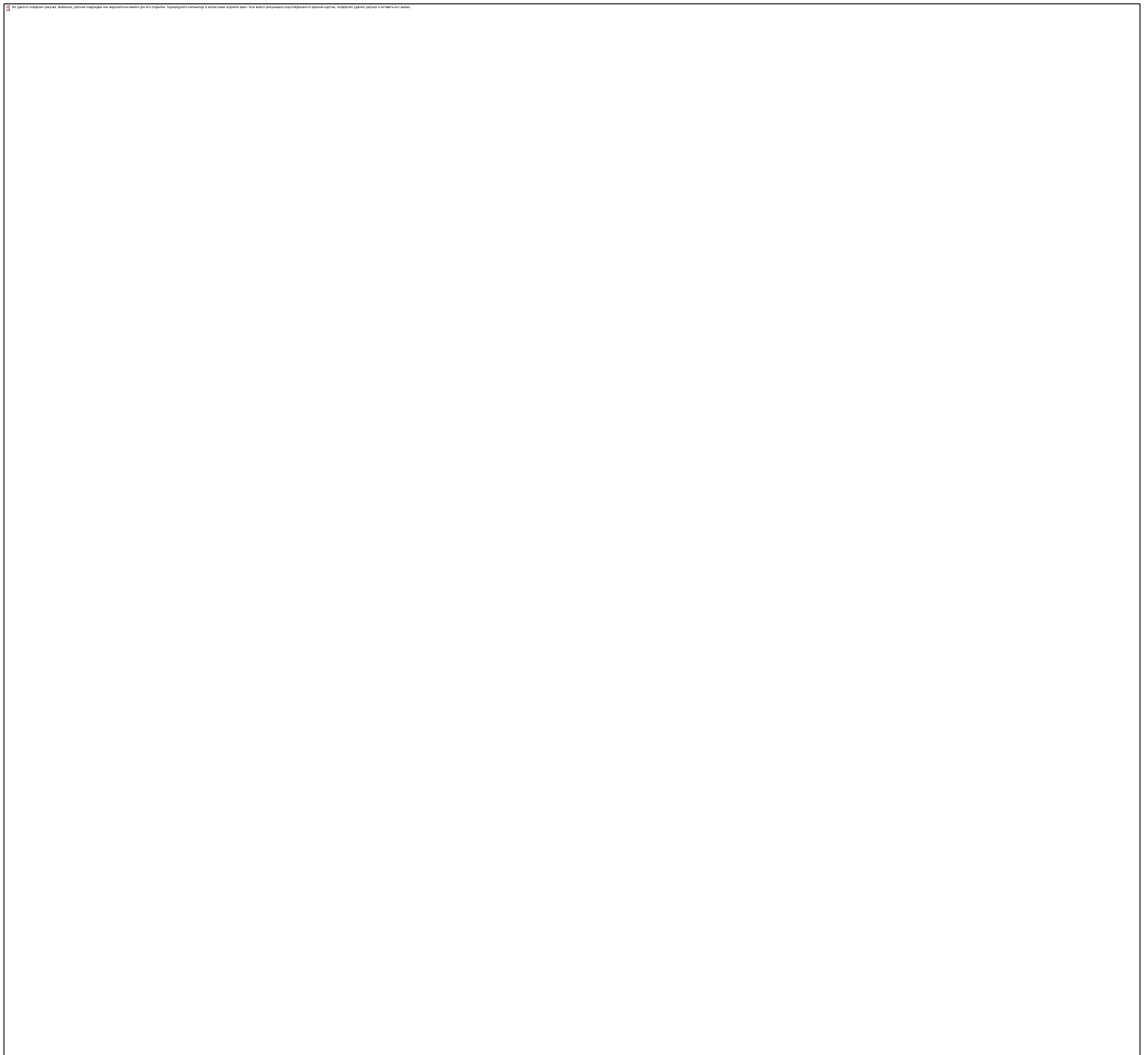
Additionally, a still unsolved question is what similarities and differences are there in the narrator's experience from *The Yellow Wallpaper* with Mademoiselle Reisz and Edna Pontellier's journeys and in their responses to societal expectations and personal oppression.

Their stories present diverse viewpoints on the pursuit of independence and the American Dream in the fin de siècle period. The narrator of *The Yellow Wallpaper* represents the resistance to harmful cultural and medical norms. Her descent into madness, triggered by enforced confinement and misunderstood mental illness, reflects the denial of personal freedom and self-expression, contrasting sharply with the American Dream's promise of opportunity and liberty. Mademoiselle Reisz, in contrast, embodies artistic rebellion and independence. Unmarried and childless, she prioritizes her art over societal norms, representing a conscious rejection of conventional expectations in favour of personal fulfillment. Her character

demonstrates an alternative path within the American Dream, focusing on self-determination and the pursuit of individual passion. Edna Pontellier's story is one of internal conflict within societal and marital confines. Unlike the narrator's enforced isolation or Mademoiselle Reisz's chosen solitude, Edna grapples with her desires and societal pressures, ultimately choosing a tragic path. Her journey questions the attainability of the American Dream for women constrained by societal norms.

These characters collectively exemplify the intricate challenges that women encountered in their pursuit of autonomy and personal fulfillment. They highlight the constraints associated with the American Dream, particularly for women who must navigate societal norms and individual subjugation during a period marked by substantial cultural and social changes.

To examine and depict the intricate experiences of these three characters, a Venn diagram was constructed. The analysis of each character's narrative within the framework of the American Dream aids in comprehending their stories and facilitates discussions on the literary implications of the fin de siècle era.



*Venn diagram 1. Intersection of Identities: Challenging Societal Conventions
in the Fin de Siècle Literature*

So, the short story *The Yellow Wallpaper* by Charlotte Perkins Gilman effectively portrays the tough obstacles and difficulties encountered by women as they strive for independence and personal satisfaction, specifically within the confines of societal conventions and gender roles prevalent during the fin de siècle. The narrator's dramatic deterioration of mental health functions as a potent allegory for the wider struggle to combat oppressive patriarchal systems, effectively

emphasizing the constraints imposed on women by the American Dream. In order to delve deeper into these themes, a Venn diagram was created to compare and contrast the experiences of the narrator, Mademoiselle Reisz and Edna Pontellier. This diagram depicts the divergent responses of the characters towards societal expectations, as well as their deliberate efforts to establish unique identities.

2.2.4. Jennie: A Representation of Conventional Womanhood and Domesticity

One of the common features of the fin de siècle literature is that in most of the works there is always a female character who fully corresponds to the canons of that time. In Kate Chopin's *The Awakening* such a figure is represented by Adele Ratignolle who is a devoted mom and wife. Charlotte Perkins Gilman described the character of Jennie in *The Yellow Wallpaper* as the epitome of nineteenth-century womanhood.

Jennie assumes an important part in the story, symbolizing the conventional societal expectations imposed upon women during the late 19th century. Jennie, portrayed as the narrator's sister-in-law and housekeeper, is presented as a manifestation of the prevailing concept of domestic femininity during the fin de siècle. The protagonist's personality contrasts sharply with that of the narrator, who struggles with the constraints imposed by traditional domesticity.

Jennie's role is distinguished by her unwavering commitment to household tasks and her evident satisfaction with her position within the domestic sphere. The narrator states, "There comes John's sister. Such a dear girl as she is... She is a perfect, and enthusiastic housekeeper..." (Gilman, 2018, p. 2). She is portrayed as a conscientious caretaker of the household, while also serving as a symbol of adherence to and embodiment of the prevailing societal conventions of the era. The narrator's increasing dissatisfaction and mental distress sharply contrast with the contentment

and dedication exhibited by Jennie in her domestic role who also supervises her brother's wife as she should, "Of course I didn't do a thing. Jennie sees to everything now" (Gilman, 2018, p. 3). This contradiction highlights societal pressures on women, particularly regarding their domestic roles and submissiveness. Jennie's character embodies the archetype of the "ideal" woman during that era, symbolizing the romanticized version of femininity that derives fulfilment and self-definition within the domestic sphere. This stands in stark contrast to the narrator's yearning for intellectual stimulation and independence.

The narrator in *The Yellow Wallpaper* embodies an opposite direction, expressing a deep longing for both intellectual and personal autonomy. Her efforts to overcome the limitations imposed by her domestic role and her husband's dominance symbolize her pursuit of independence, representing a significant departure from societal norms. The narrator's thoughts, "I sometimes fancy that in my condition if I had less opposition and more society and stimulus – but John says the very worst thing I can do is to think about my condition..." (Gilman, 2018, p. 1), highlight her internal conflict and desire for self-expression, counter to the era's expectations.

The contrast of these two characters serves to emphasize the overarching societal narrative. Jennie embodies an image of internalized conformity to societal norms, who even "had a very good report to give" (Gilman, 2018, p. 5) after answering doctor's questions about her brother's wife state, whereas the narrator represents the resistance and opposition to these limitations. This comparison exemplifies the struggle encountered by women who aspired for more than what the prevailing norms of the American Dream permitted, frequently resulting in feelings of confinement and discontentment.

Analysing the correlation between profession and the American Dream as it pertained to women of the late 19th century is facilitated by the critical lens that Jennie's character provides. The societal norm that "hopes for no better profession" (Gilman, 2018, p. 2) than housekeeping underscores a cultural narrative that discouraged women from pursuing professional or intellectual endeavours. This

limitation on women's professional choices directly impacted their ability to achieve the broader aspects of the American Dream, which emphasized personal achievement and economic success.

Moreover, Jennie's role in *The Yellow Wallpaper* reinforces the fin de siècle patriarchal norms. Her acceptance and adherence to the traditional domestic role show societal pressures on women to stay home. Gilman uses this character to examine women's limited roles and society's enforcement of them. Her character symbolizes the cultural norm that limited women's autonomy and personal ambitions outside the home.

Additionally, the constraints that Jennie represents in the late 19th century stand in direct opposition to the aspirations of the American Dream. Her adherence to traditional gender roles reflects a cultural narrative that limits women's potential to that of a homemaker. This depiction by Charlotte Perkins Gilman challenges the ways in which the American Dream restricted women's paths to independence and personal development.

To our knowledge, no prior studies have examined how Jennie's character in *The Yellow Wallpaper* reflects the limitations of the American Dream for women of her era. One of the main reasons for this is the focus on more confrontational characters. Characters in works of literature who actively challenge societal norms, such as the narrator in *The Yellow Wallpaper*, have a tendency to receive a greater amount of attention in literary analysis. In contrast, characters like Jennie, who conform to societal expectations, have not been examined as closely for their symbolic representation of larger cultural themes such as the limitations of the American Dream for women.

Furthermore, historically, feminist literary criticism placed emphasis on the examination of characters and narratives that overtly contested patriarchal systems. Consequently, the potential importance of characters such as Jennie, who symbolize adherence to these societal frameworks, has been disregarded within the framework

of more comprehensive feminist motifs, which encompass the examination of the American Dream.

Jennie's character, who faithfully fulfills her domestic responsibilities, "while Jennie is getting the house ready" (Gilman, 2018, p. 4) is an important but understudied aspect of feminist criticism. In many ways, she personifies the oppressive social norms that feminists have long fought to change. Her character serves as a foil to the narrator's struggle, showing how many women of the time simply accepted and did not question traditional gender roles. This comparison is critical for grasping how societal norms affect women and their ability to achieve the American dream.

Furthermore, the limited attention given to characters such as Jennie within the realm of feminist literary criticism is indicative of a more widespread pattern observed in the examination of literature and culture. There exists an inclination to give precedence to narratives centered around acts of rebellion and over resistance, often neglecting the significance of comprehending the more nuanced manifestations of compliance and complicity. These subtler forms of participation are equally instrumental in upholding and perpetuating patriarchal systems. The failure to conduct a comprehensive analysis of characters who adhere to conventional societal roles represents a missed chance to delve into the internalization and perpetuation of societal norms, even among those who experience the greatest oppression from them.

Also, academic discourse around *The Yellow Wallpaper* has predominantly focused on the narrator's experience of mental illness and her struggle against oppressive medical practices and marital constraints. Jennie's role as a symbol of conventional womanhood and its implications for the American Dream has been less explored due to a historical underrepresentation of discussions around the more subtle forms of gendered societal restrictions.

By examining Jennie's character in *The Yellow Wallpaper*, the paradox of the American Dream for women can be scrutinized to discern the gendered nuances of this ideal during the late 19th century. The American Dream, culturally esteemed for

its emphasis on individualism, personal success and upward mobility, presents a strikingly different narrative when applied to women of this era, such as Jennie, whose life trajectory was markedly influenced by prevailing gender norms.

The cultural ethos of the period was strongly influenced by patriarchal values, which prescribed that a woman's primary responsibility was within the domestic sphere, encompassing the management of the household and the care of the family. This societal framework exhibits a notable contrast with the broader American Dream narrative, which emphasizes individual ambition and financial prosperity. For women, the Dream was reconfigured into an ideal of self-sacrifice and familial dedication, positioning their aspirations and successes within the confines of home and family life, rather than in the public or professional realms.

Understanding the gendered limitations of the American Dream in the historical context of Jennie's character offers crucial insights into ongoing discussions about gender equality. It stresses the importance of reevaluating cultural narratives to identify and remove structural barriers that have limited women's opportunities for achieving personal and economic success.

In analyzing Jennie's character, it is essential to draw comparisons with other female characters from the same era to understand the varying responses to societal norms and expectations. These comparisons can illuminate how different characters embody or resist the prevailing patriarchal norms and the implications of these norms on their respective journeys towards or away from the American Dream.

Adele Ratignolle, a character in Kate Chopin's *The Awakening*, is another example of a woman who conforms to the societal norms of the time, "The mother-women seemed to prevail that summer at Grand Isle... Many of them were delicious in the role; one of them was the embodiment of every womanly grace and charm... Her name was Adèle Ratignolle" (Chopin, 2016, p. 19). Like Jennie, Adele is depicted as a devoted wife and mother, embodying the ideal of domestic womanhood. However, the key difference between Adele and Jennie is in their narrative contexts. While Jennie is contrasted against the narrator's desire for

intellectual freedom in *The Yellow Wallpaper*, Adele is compared to Edna Pontellier's journey of self-discovery and rebellion against societal constraints. Like Jennie's role against the narrator, Adele represents the societal expectation of femininity and motherhood, and acts as an opposition to Edna's unconventional path. As representations of the dominant ideals of their respective times, Adele and Jennie also highlight the challenges faced by women attempting to realize the American Dream.

So, Jennie's character in Charlotte Perkins Gilman's *The Yellow Wallpaper* is an important representation of the traditional ideas of womanhood and domesticity that were popular in the fin de siècle time. Her portrayal emphasizes the restrictions and expectations that society placed on women, especially with regard to pursuing the American Dream. Jennie's steadfast dedication to her home duties and her seeming contentment with these limitations stand in sharp contrast to women's increasing desires for intellectual and personal autonomy. Reflecting a cultural narrative that restricted women's potential to domestic domains, this character analysis highlights the intricacies of gender roles and the influence of societal norms on women's lives. Through examining Jennie's role, we are able to acquire important understandings of the gendered complexities of the American Dream and the obstacles that women who aspire to equality and fulfillment outside of the home must overcome. Her character stands for both conformity to social norms and the necessity of reevaluating cultural narratives that have traditionally limited women's opportunities.

2.2. Real-Life Implications of Feminist Themes in *The Awakening* and *The Yellow Wallpaper*

Through a critical analysis of the lessons learned and the contemporary relevance of *The Awakening* by Kate Chopin and *The Yellow Wallpaper* by Charlotte Perkins Gilman, it becomes apparent that the themes and concerns explored in these

literary works persistently reverberate in present-day discourse surrounding feminism and gender equality. Although the settings of these literary pieces are the fin de siècle period, they provide timeless perspectives on the challenges that women encounter when attempting to assert their autonomy and question established social conventions.

Despite significant advancements in women's rights, contemporary society continues to grapple with many of the same issues highlighted in novels like *The Awakening* and *The Yellow Wallpaper*. The concept of gender roles, though more fluid now, still imposes expectations on women's behavior and choices. In the workplace, women frequently encounter a persistent gender pay gap and a glass ceiling. It becomes evident after looking at the statistics of 2022 that women in the United States earned only "82%" of what men earned, highlighting the enduring economic struggles that mirror those depicted in Chopin and Gilman's narratives (*Gender pay gap*, n.d.).

As a societal and economic problem, the persistent gender pay gap represents more than just a number. This discrepancy indicates structural obstacles preventing women from reaching equal economic status in addition to persistent wage disparities. Some examples of these biases include the undervaluing of work traditionally done by women and the lack of equal access to career advancement opportunities based on one's gender. The gender pay gap is exacerbated by the fact that women are overrepresented in low-wage and part-time occupations.

Furthermore, the gender pay gap carries substantial implications that extend beyond mere financial disparities. The phenomenon has a significant impact on the permanent financial stability, exerting influence on women's capacity to amass wealth, save for retirement and attain financial autonomy. The economic disparity is particularly evident among women of color, who frequently encounter compounded biases resulting from the intersection of race and gender.

Additionally, the feminist movement has evolved considerably since the publication of these novels, transitioning through various waves and ideologies.

Nevertheless, the core themes of seeking autonomy and challenging the patriarchal status quo, as portrayed in these literary works, remain central to feminist discourse. Modern feminism, particularly with its emphasis on intersectionality, recognizes the complex interplay of gender, race, class and other identity factors in women's experiences of inequality, a concept pioneered by Kimberlé Crenshaw who argues that "Because the intersectional experience is greater than the sum of racism and sexism, any analysis that does not take intersectionality into account cannot sufficiently address the particular manner in which Black women are subordinated" (Crenshaw, 2018).

Analyzing the American Dream, which has conventionally been perceived as an endeavor to achieve personal success and economic affluence, from a more nuanced feminist standpoint requires the application of this lens. In the context of the American Dream, intersectionality reveals that the barriers to achieving this dream are not uniformly experienced by all women. The intersection of gender with other forms of social stratification results in varied challenges and experiences. For instance, women of color, women from lower socioeconomic backgrounds or LGBTQ+ women may face unique hurdles in their pursuit of the American Dream, hurdles that are not as prominent or are different for white, middle-class women. The recognition of this fact is essential in comprehending that the pursuit of the American Dream is not a universally applicable storyline but rather an intricate and diverse encounter influenced by a multitude of intersecting identities.

The narratives of *The Awakening* and *The Yellow Wallpaper* primarily focus on the experiences of middle-class white women. Although these narratives effectively depict the battle for independence and opposition to patriarchal conventions, an intersectional perspective promotes a more comprehensive examination of a wide range of experiences. Modern feminist discourse, influenced by intersectionality, advocates for a more inclusive American Dream – one that acknowledges and addresses the varied barriers faced by women across different social strata.

Thus, the American Dream becomes a more comprehensive vision of social justice and equality when viewed within a feminist intersectional framework, rather than just as a goal for financial success. It requires a reevaluation of the social structures and conventions that have historically hampered women's advancement and promotes systemic changes that enable the success and empowerment of all women, regardless of the intersections of their identities.

Moreover, the primary protagonists in *The Awakening* and *The Yellow Wallpaper*, specifically Edna Pontellier and the unnamed narrator, respectively, serve as embodiments of the attempt to overcome societal constraints and the quest for individual selfhood. Their stories offer significant contextualization for comprehending the historical origins of numerous present-day feminist concerns. In addition, these narratives also function as cautionary tales highlighting the repercussions of societal apathy towards women's psychological well-being and individual ambitions. In 2021, the World Health Organization emphasized that "women's mental health can be significantly influenced by societal pressures and gender norms" (*Gender and health*, n.d.). This underscores the importance of considering these narratives in contemporary discussions surrounding gender equality.

What is more, the matter of achieving a harmonious equilibrium between work and personal life, which holds significant relevance in present-day society, exhibits an intricate link with the thematic investigations presented in Kate Chopin's *The Awakening* and Charlotte Perkins Gilman's *The Yellow Wallpaper*. These literary works, despite being situated in the fin de siècle era, effectively depict the ongoing challenge faced by women in reconciling their individual aspirations with the societal norms, particularly in relation to family responsibilities and career goals.

In *The Awakening*, Edna Pontellier's character struggles with the competing demands of motherhood, marriage and fulfilling her own ambitions and needs. Her struggle is representative of the modern woman's fight to advance her career while also tending to her family. Many modern women can relate to Edna's struggles as she

strives to find her own identity outside of the roles prescribed by society while also pursuing her artistic interests.

Likewise, *The Yellow Wallpaper* explores the central character's battle with postpartum depression and the constraining societal expectations that confine her to the domestic realm, disguised as a prescribed rest cure. The narrative serves as a potent critique of the prevailing inclination within society to diminish women's agency and well-being, matters that continue to hold contemporary significance. The interpretation can be made that the narrator's gradual decline into a state of insanity serves as a metaphorical representation of the psychological consequences that arise from the deprivation of an active societal and professional engagement. This predicament, which persists for numerous women as they strive to reconcile their familial responsibilities with their personal and vocational aspirations, is highlighted here.

Both novels, therefore, not only critique the gender norms of their time but also presciently anticipate the modern discourse on work-life balance. They highlight the need for societal and policy changes that support women in their pursuit of the American Dream – changes that acknowledge and facilitate women's roles as professionals and individuals with their own aspirations, in addition to their familial roles.

Finally aspect that is crucial for real-life implications of feminist themes in *The Awakening* and *The Yellow Wallpaper* is the role of education and career opportunities.

It is impossible to overstate the significance of having a good education in order to accomplish the goals outlined in the American Dream. Despite significant advancements in women's educational achievements, there remains a considerable journey ahead in achieving gender parity in leadership roles across various sectors, including business. The concepts of intellectual growth and personal development presented in the books are consistent with this perpetual challenge.

The theme of education as a gateway to achieving the American Dream, particularly in the context of *The Yellow Wallpaper* and the character of Jennie, who “is a perfect, and enthusiastic housekeeper, and hopes for no better profession” (Gilman, 2018, p. 2), highlights the nuanced complexities of women’s access to education and subsequent professional opportunities in the fin de siècle period.

For Jennie, education and intellectual growth do not seem to be priorities, as her fulfillment is depicted as being rooted in domestic duties. This portrayal is reflective of a larger social context in which women’s education was frequently restricted to training them for domestic roles rather than encouraging intellectual development or professional aspirations. The limited scope of education available to women like Jennie effectively restricted their opportunities for professional advancement and leadership, perpetuating the gender disparities in the workforce.

Through emphasizing the importance of broadening educational opportunities to encompass subjects beyond conventional gender roles, the narrative actively participates in the ongoing discourse surrounding the indispensability of providing women with equitable access to education. It highlights the critical nature of enabling women to surpass professional obstacles and realize the American Dream in its broadest and most inclusive interpretation by providing them with an education that nurtures intellectual development, individual autonomy and creativity.

So, the examination of feminist themes in *The Awakening* and *The Yellow Wallpaper* demonstrates their continuing significance to contemporary discussions on gender equality and pursuing the American Dream. These literary works, transcending their fin de siècle settings, provide timeless insights into the challenges women face in asserting autonomy and navigating societal norms. Despite advancements in women’s rights, the persistent gender pay gap, the struggle for work-life balance and the barriers to educational and professional advancement underscore the ongoing relevance of these novels. The intersectional approach of modern feminism further enriches this discourse, highlighting the varied experiences of women across different social strata. Thus, Chopin’s and Gilman’s narratives not

only reflect the historical context of women's struggles but also continue to extremely resonate, offering a critical lens through which to examine and address the varied challenges women encounter in achieving true equality and fulfillment in their pursuit of the American Dream.

Conclusions to Chapter 2

The comparative analysis of *The Awakening* by Kate Chopin and *The Yellow Wallpaper* by Charlotte Perkins Gilman situated within the historical backdrop of the fin de siècle era, provides valuable insights into the intersection of feminism, gender disparity and the aspiration for the American Dream. These literary works, based on the context of substantial societal and cultural change, function as essential examinations of the changing roles and aspirations of women during an essential period in history. All the obstacles and resistance women face on their path to autonomy, self-definition and fulfilment in life are vividly portrayed by the authors. This portrayal aligns with the wider feminist debate prevalent during that era.

The characters of Edna Pontellier, Mademoiselle Reisz, the narrator of *The Yellow Wallpaper* and Jennie represent different facets of the female experience within the societal constraints of their era. Edna's quest for self-discovery and personal freedom, Mademoiselle Reisz's embodiment of artistic rebellion and independence, the narrator's descent into madness as a response to oppressive societal norms and Jennie's adherence to conventional domesticity illustrate the diverse ways women navigated and responded to the gendered expectations of the fin de siècle. These characters collectively offer a vivid illustration of the challenges women faced in their pursuit of the American Dream, constrained by societal norms and gendered roles.

The contemporary discourse surrounding women's rights and gender equality demonstrates that these themes continue to be significant beyond their historical

context. Notwithstanding considerable progress, the continuing gender pay disparity, difficulties in attaining a harmonious work-life balance and persistent obstacles to educational and occupational progression serve as vivid indications of the ongoing battle for gender parity. The incorporation of an intersectional framework within contemporary feminism acknowledges the intricate dynamics between gender, race, class and other identity elements. This perspective contributes to a more comprehensive understanding of the obstacles faced by women and the varied nature of their experiences.

In addition, the narratives that are presented in *The Awakening* and *The Yellow Wallpaper* serve as cautionary tales because they highlight the potential effects that can occur when society is indifferent to women's mental well-being and their individual aspirations. The significance of reassessing cultural narratives and eliminating structural obstacles that restrict women's prospects for personal and economic achievement is underscored. These narratives emphasize the importance of persisting in the pursuit of a more inclusive and equitable American Dream, which recognizes and caters to the varied experiences and aspirations of women from all backgrounds.

CONCLUSIONS

The study of the American Dream in the Fin de Siècle American fiction has important contemporary relevance because it uncovers the historical roots of modern perceptions of identity, success and personal fulfillment. During the Fin de Siècle, a period of deep intellectual and cultural flux, the American Dream began to shift from its traditional focus on material wealth and status seeking to encompass broader themes of personal authenticity and psychological freedom. As demonstrated in literary works such as *The Awakening* and *The Yellow Wallpaper*, this shift reflects contemporary discussions concerning the essence of achievement and the significance of uniqueness in a world that is undergoing rapid change. This inquiry holds significant importance in a time when the very meaning of the American Dream is perpetually reassessed and reconstructed considering contemporary obstacles and ambitions.

The undertaken tasks revealed that the Fin de Siècle period markedly influenced literary depictions of gender and the American Dream, reflecting a broader societal transformation towards new understandings of personal success and identity. An examination of pre-Fin de Siècle and Fin de Siècle conceptions of the American Dream revealed an adjustment toward more individualized and introspective goals and aspirations. This evolution was vividly reflected in the selected literary texts, where the American Dream's portrayal diverged significantly from conventional success narratives, instead exploring themes of personal identity and freedom.

Examining the stories of fictional women like Edna Pontellier, Mademoiselle Reisz, the unnamed narrator of *The Yellow Wallpaper* and Jennie illustrated the various and nuanced paths women of the time took in their pursuits of independence and self-determination. Additionally, the feminist analysis provided within this study highlighted the American Dream narratives as a reflection of the gender inequalities

prevalent during the Fin de Siècle, offering a critical view of the societal context of the time.

This research holds great importance as it sheds light on the substantial effect of historical and cultural contexts on literary portrayals of key themes, such as the American Dream. This analysis offers an expanded understanding of the dynamic characteristics of societal aspirations and the function of literature in both mirroring and contesting societal norms and expectations.

The research findings indicate that the Fin de Siècle was a crucial era in the redefinition of the American Dream, characterized by an increased emphasis on individual agency and criticism of conventional gender norms. Insightful perspectives on the ongoing transformation of societal ambitions and the persistent pursuit of personal autonomy and individuality can be found in the literature of this era.

RESUME

Кінець XIX століття став одним із ключових періодів зростання інтересу до гендерної рівності, який у подальшому змінив поняття Американської мрії та досі впливає на її розвиток у контексті сучасних жінок. Ось чому дослідження гендерної динаміки, представленій в американській літературі епохи *Fin de Siècle* на прикладі творів «Пробудження» та «Жовті шпалери», та як ця динаміка перетинається з еволюційною концепцією Американської мрії з урахуванням сьогоденних перешкод на шляху досягнення гендерної рівності, є актуальним завданням.

Робота присвячена дослідженню, як Американська мрія зображена та проблематизована в «Пробудженні» Кейт Шопен і «Жовтих шпалерах» Шарлотти Перкінс Гілмен з особливим акцентом на аналізі гендерних ролей і феміністичної критики в контексті американської літератури кінця 19 століття.

Предметом цієї роботи є дослідження Американської мрії, оскільки вона перетинається з феміністичними ідеологіями в американській літературі періоду *Fin de Siècle*, зокрема через аналіз творів «Пробудження» Кейт Шопен і «Жовті шпалери» Шарлотти Перкінс Гілмен.

Об'єктами цього дослідження є роман «Пробудження» Кейт Шопен та оповідання «Жовті шпалери» Шарлотти Перкінс Гілмен.

У першому розділі цієї роботи оцінено вплив епохи *Fin de Siècle* на зображення гендерних ролей та Американської мрії в американській літературі, досліджено уявлення про американську мрію часів *pre-Fin de Siècle* та *Fin de Siècle*, зокрема через твори «Пробудження» та «Жовті шпалери», а також розглянуто еволюцію Американської мрії кінця XIX століття та її представлення у вибраних текстах.

У другому розділі проаналізовано складні ролі героїнь, таких як Една Понтельє, мадемуазель Рейс, неназваний оповідач «Жовтих шпалер» і Дженні в їхніх пошуках ідентичності та свободи та проведено феміністичний аналіз того,

як Американська мрія підкреслює гендерну нерівність у суспільному контексті Fin de Siècle.

Ключові слова: Американська мрія, Fin de Siècle, фемінізм, гендерна рівність, суспільні норми, ідентичність, незалежність, «Нова жінка» «Пробудження», «Жовті шпалери».

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SUPPLEMENTS

Appendix A

Aspect	Fin de Siècle Era	Present Day
Feminist Movements	Focus on suffrage, labour rights, educational reforms	More inclusivity and intersectionality, addressing a broader range of issues
Gender Equality	Start of breaking down Victorian gender norms, restricted reach	Persistent struggle against gender norms, heightened emphasis on inclusivity and diversity
The American Dream	Gendered interpretation, limited accessibility for women	Expanded to include gender equality, recognizing diverse experiences
Economic Participation	Emergence of women in workforce, often in lower-paying jobs	Still striving for breaking barriers and getting equal pay in many fields
Societal Changes	Shift in societal perspectives on women's roles, limited inclusivity	Efforts to redefine gender roles in society, increased awareness of intersectionality

Appendix B

