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Abstract

Using Kate Chopin's *The Awakening* and Sylvia Plath's *The Bell Jar*, this paper examines how the female body becomes a prison oppressing women who live within a patriarchal society (White). Women who become desperate for autonomy often use their bodies as a tool to seek liberation, as they are the only things that cannot be taken away or controlled by the men around them. However, as becomes evident through Edna Pontellier and Esther Greenwood, it can be difficult for women to disconnect themselves from the patriarchy since their journey toward freedom usually reveals the societal conditioning they have undergone when they begin to police how the women around them perform gender. This paper also investigates how these sad, privileged, white women take on the role of an oppressor in attempting to escape the role of the oppressed while still being sensitive toward their own mental health struggles. Although these novels are critical to feminist literature, this paper argues that literary white women too often rely on the help of people of color in order to escape their own constraints while remaining oblivious to the minorities' own constraints.

Keywords: *The Awakening*, *The Bell Jar*, *Women's Literature*, *Intersectionality in Literature*, *Feminism*

In both Kate Chopin's *The Awakening* and Sylvia Plath's *The Bell Jar*, privileged protagonists struggle for contentment within the constraints of femininity. A crucial moment for Edna Pontellier and Esther Greenwood's lives is when they are attempting to navigate spaces dominated by white men and become acutely aware of how their gender negatively impacts others' perceptions of them. As a result, both women realize how fragile and fickle their identity is because they have never been encouraged to find passions outside of the stereotypical nurturing mother-role created by the patriarchy. A loss of identity and a lack of bodily autonomy is a dangerous combination that leads women down a reckless path in order to gain a sense of control. In depicting their stories, these novels question whether it is possible for women of their time to live outside societal constraints and what the consequences of trying to do so are. As Pontellier and Greenwood discover that they do not want their identity to adhere to the constraints of male-dominated spaces, they discover their place in the world through bodily autonomy; however, their journeys result in total isolation from the world and fail to examine how these women might be oppressing others.

Both Edna and Esther are introduced to the reader as women who are oppressed by male-dominated spaces. Mrs. Pontellier believes the source of her suffering is marriage, while Esther understands that femininity itself is the oppressive space. In literature, "space" refers to the interrelations between a group of people in which there is a sense of collective identity. Consequently, the dominant culture decides which morals and identities are acceptable. Inevitably, space neglects to consider the people outside of its guidelines (Glenn 381). Chopin's use of symbolism demonstrates that Mrs. Pontellier feels her marriage is an oppressive space when the novella begins with a caged parrot's singing disrupting Mr. Pontellier's reading (Chopin 43). Chopin cleverly follows this scene by introducing the relationship between Mr. and Mrs. Pontellier. The first time Mr. Pontellier speaks to his wife he comments on her appearance and looks at her as "[a] valuable piece of personal property which has suffered some damage" (Chopin 44). Much like the parrot, Edna is trapped in a space where Mr. Pontellier feels entitled to critique her. Some feminist scholars believe that Mr. Pontellier is the sole responsibility for his wife's suffering (Glendening 50), while others suggest that marriage is but one cell in the prison that is femininity (White 98). In *The Bell Jar*, Plath's

protagonist furthers the latter theory because she is an unmarried woman still confined in the space of femininity. Esther is much more aware of how her gender impacts her life and views her potential future much like figs hanging from a tree. The first fig is Esther's life as a wife and a mother while the others depict her as a magazine editor, published poet, and professor (Plath 77). Esther understands she can follow the roles of a traditional woman or she can be successful, but she cannot obtain both (Smith 2). Because she describes the fig representing family first, it is most likely that a traditional lifestyle is the future Esther finds the most obtainable (as the lowest hanging fruit is the easiest to see and requires the least amount of work to achieve). Edna and Esther differ in the sense that Edna is married; however, they both suffer from the confinements of femininity and its expectations. Therefore, Esther's character proves that White is correct in stating that Edna's despair stems from not understanding how her gender factors into her oppressive marriage.

As both protagonists attempt to navigate a world dominated by the patriarchy, Edna can no longer pretend that her marriage is the sole source of her oppression while Esther's encounters with men further proves that she will never fit into the traditional feminine role. Although the two women have different experiences, they both conclude that masculinity hinders their freedom of expression. By the end of the novella, Edna has not encountered a single man who does not disappoint her. Even her own father reduces her to an object and wishes that Mr. Pontellier would be more controlling of his wife (Chopin 125), and her love affair with Robert ends abruptly after Robert states that he believes that Edna *belongs* to her husband (Chopin 167). Edna wants nothing more than good relationships with the men in her life, yet she is unable to form them because the men objectify her and fail to see her as autonomous (Ramos 154). Although Edna views her marriage as her main oppressor, it is unjust for scholars to reach the same conclusion. Every male character in this novella shares the same view as Mr. Pontellier, thus entrapping Edna within masculinity's view on what a woman should be.

Because she is not married but acknowledges the faults in her romantic relationship as well as other relationships with men, Esther Greenwood further proves that masculinity inherently polices femininity regardless of the relationship between man and woman. Buddy Willard tells Esther that if they were to get married, she

would no longer need to write poems; additionally, Esther recalls her father admitting to her mother that his personality leading up to their marriage had been an act and that he did not become his true self until the night they married (Plath 85). From these experiences, Esther concludes that marriage will result in a loss of her autonomy and domestic imprisonment (Smith 12). Esther concerns herself not only with her autonomy but also the women around her (such as her mother) because she understands marriage as a space in which women submit to the masculine expectations of femininity. For both Esther and Edna, marriage is a male-dominated space; however, patriarchal oppression goes further than marriage. Edna's affair with Robert alongside Esther's relationship with Buddy are examples of how women are reduced to inescapable stereotypes the moment that they enter a male-dominated space. Even their fathers oppress them, as they expect all women to behave like wives. Even if the question of marriage were removed from the equation, Edna and Esther would still face sexism from other men.

Furthering White's analogy that femininity is the imprisonment rather than marriage, the concepts of marriage and motherhood are neighboring cells for these two protagonists. Although marriage and motherhood are closely related, expectations for each role differ and thus create additional conflicts for Edna and Esther. Edna's difference is most evident when she discusses motherhood with Adele, a peer who is deemed the perfect "motherwoman." Edna confesses that she does not believe a woman should have to sacrifice her own personality in order to be considered a good mother (Chopin 51). Because Edna refuses to conform to the sacrificial mother stereotype that expects her to forgo her own needs for her children's, her peers reduce the complexity of her personhood to a single issue: being a bad mother (Rooks 130). Even if Edna were able to escape the oppressive confines of marriage, societal disapproval would still define her.

The Bell Jar further develops how motherhood oppresses women. Unlike Edna, Esther is not a mother, yet she spends most of the novel focusing on whether she should be one. It is her gender that suggests her life revolves around this question. She almost feels guilt for thinking of a future in which she rejects the responsibility of motherhood. While on a date with Buddy Willard, a student doctor, Esther is struck by the sight of a woman in tremendous pain giving birth on "some awful

torture table" (Plath 64). It is at this moment that Esther is confident that she does not want to be a mother, as she is left feeling the "fear and disgust of the grotesque reality of womanhood" (Noriko 77). Esther strays from the oppressive space of femininity because, much like Mrs. Pontellier, she does not want to sacrifice her own comfort for a child's. Since both Edna and Esther understand that motherhood is supposed to come with sacrifices—sacrifices such as these women's very identities—White is correct in stating that marriage is not the only oppressive force these women face. In the world of these novels, femininity itself has is what constrains them.

After introducing the feminine constraints both characters endure, both novels shift focus so that each protagonist experiences a disruption of the normal power dynamic present in male-dominated spaces, finally making them able to understand the oppression they have been experiencing. No longer can Edna or Esther ignore how their gender has worked against them. For Edna, learning how to swim allows her to feel "power" and the ability to "control the working of her body and soul" (Chopin 73). From this moment forward, Chopin's protagonist struggles to be content within her own life because she knows her world has limited her life experience. By learning how to swim, Edna achieves the power of choice: the choice to drown (Kearns 67). After achieving this power, Edna becomes overwhelmed with possessing a sense of bodily autonomy and cannot fathom living a life that takes it away. In contrast to Edna's positive awakening, Esther's series of awakenings does not allow her to feel the same sense of liberation. Instead, she understands what it is like to have no bodily autonomy. The night before Esther returns home from college, she is sexually assaulted and abused, and the following day she is told she did not get accepted for the summer writing internship she applied for (Plath 114). It is through these two events that Esther becomes separated from the women around her because experiences such as rape and rejection are rarely spoken of amongst groups of people. This silence in the wake of such trauma leaves Esther feeling isolated and powerless (Bonds 55). Throughout the novel, Esther voices that women should not have to submit to men; therefore, Esther views her sexual assault as her willingly going against her own morals. When these power dynamics are disrupted, Edna and Esther understand that femininity is an oppressive space defined by a lack of power.

After Edna and Esther awaken to the pressure that

male-dominated spaces have created for them, both women decide to turn their physical bodies into a place in which they have complete control. In literature, a “place” refers to the character’s ability to pause and reconstruct a space that challenges her into a space that uplifts her (Glenn 382). The physical body can “[n]egotiate, shape, and define their relationships to the physical world...while challenging what it means to belong” (Hamilton-Mckenna 321). Edna transforms her body into a place by exploring her own suppressed sexual desires for the sake of pleasure alone rather than reproduction when she has sex with Alcee (Chopin 150). Edna is not discontented with motherhood itself but rather the expectation that she should be a mother. When she is allowed to explore her own identity outside of being Mr. Pontellier’s wife, Edna begins to embrace being a mother without constrictions, as it is only after this encounter with Alcee that Edna *chooses* to visit her children for an entire week and expresses content in their company (Rooks 129). Because Edna’s awakening leads her to liberation and a sense of bodily autonomy, she nurtures the vessel that allows her to feel free; in contrast, Esther views her sexual assault as her body betraying her and no longer feels the need to maintain her appearance. She completely neglects her own appearance because she knows it will make her less desirable. At the doctor’s office, Esther confesses that she has not washed her hair in three weeks while also being severely sleep deprived and starving herself (Plath 127). Some scholars speculate that Plath’s struggling protagonist develops anorexia, as she becomes “[o]bsessed with getting rid of her non-existing fat that as a spectacle could be interpreted as a sign of her femininity” (Sellei 149). In conjunction with becoming thinner and appearing less likely to bear children, Esther flaunts her greasy hair and dark under-eye circles, thereby transforming her body into a place. She is now in control of her appearance, and she no longer feels it is necessary to cater to the male gaze. Rather through indulging in sex or depriving oneself of nutrients, both women understand that their bodies are the only places that grant them control of their lives.

After finding a sense of autonomy, Edna and Esther attempt to conceive a creative life in the space that originally oppressed them. Interestingly, both women choose to pursue forms of art: Edna becomes interested in painting while Esther decides to write. Edna often visits Mademoiselle Reisz, an unmarried woman who has devoted her life to playing the piano, for advice. Made-

moiselle Reisz believes that if Edna wants to become a talented painter, she must first defy social conventions so that her art is a genuine expression of herself (Chopin 138). Although Edna believes she no longer adheres to gender roles, it is evident through the subjects of her art that she still lives within the gender binary that oppresses her. She uses “motherwoman” Adele as both her muse and main source of encouragement, which further reduces Adele’s character to her appearance and tendency to nurture (Hildebrand 197). By perceiving Adele only through her conventional attractiveness, Mrs. Pontellier conforms to the same behavior that Mr. Pontellier displays at the beginning of this novella: someone who has the authority to dictate how worthy a woman is by her beauty alone.

Esther also oppresses other women in attempt to create art. Her journey to transform her body into a place is hindered when, rather than creating her own identity, she relies on narratives she has heard in male-dominated spaces. She decides that she will spend the summer writing a novel in which she is the heroine, but she is unable to write more than one paragraph (Plath 120). Her inability to write does not stem from a lack of talent but rather how women who choose a career over family are perceived by those around them. Esther admires Jay Cee, the head editor of the magazine that Esther once wrote for; however, Esther’s praise for Jay Cee’s intellect is always followed by a comment on how unattractive Jay Cee is (Bonds 56). Mademoiselle Reisz’s advice could also have been useful for Esther, as she is unable to restructure the one-dimensional way she views women as either beautiful mothers or women who focus on their work because they are too ugly to marry. Although Edna and Esther attempt to live a life that does not abide by male-made rules, their art demonstrates how they rely on the gender binary to express themselves.

Although both pieces of literature are an attempt to express the complexities of femininity, Esther and Edna still reduce other women to harmful and stereotypical roles. When Edna interacts with Adele and Mademoiselle Reisz, she views them in accordance with their relationship with men. Although she never expresses negative feelings toward these women, subtle descriptions of their bodies reflect Edna’s internalized misogyny. Adele is introduced as “holy” and resembling an “angel,” and her body—which has birthed many children—is described as the definition of beauty with soft curves and full of charm (Chopin 51); meanwhile, her

foil Mademoiselle Reisz is introduced as a single woman with “ungraceful curves and angles” while also being “homely” with a “weazened face” (Chopin 71). It is not a coincidence that Edna finds maternity more attractive; motherhood is what she has been taught a good woman does. However, she unknowingly uses oppressive masculine ideals to oppress women herself. By admiring Adele’s appearance over Mademoiselle Reisz’s, Edna reinforces that women who accept that their selfhood has been defined by men are desirable (Rooks 125). Hence, it is through Edna’s thoughts that the reader understands that she is far less liberated than she believes. Esther Greenwood is guilty of the same behavior. She is unable to form long-lasting female friendships because she judges women through the same lens as male characters. Throughout college, Esther cannot decide if she will befriend innocent, scholarly Betsy or promiscuous Doreen. Her decision is only made when Doreen invites Esther to a bar, which results in Doreen asking Esther to go to a strange man’s apartment with her, as she plans on seducing him. During this outing, Esther swears allegiance to Betsy because “[i]t was Betsy [Esther] resembled at heart” (Plath 19). Although Esther denounces marriage and motherhood while also eventually being prescribed birth control, she cannot apply this need for bodily autonomy to the women around her. She labels Betsy as a prude virgin and Doreen as a whore. Such judgment reveals her masculine way of thinking and mirrors Buddy’s mindset later in the novel when he tells Esther women should be pure for their husbands (Sakane 32). Although she understands the double standards when they are applied to her own life, Esther is equally as guilty of reducing women to their sexual desires in a desperate attempt to detach herself from her own gender and sexuality. Although Edna and Esther desire to be free of the feminine constraints masculinity has used to entrap them, they are also guilty of furthering these masculine ideas and projecting them onto their female peers.

Edna and Esther focus so much on rejecting femininity that they do not form an identity complex enough to be viable. Chopin’s protagonist shifts her focus from escaping her identity as a mother and a wife to ostracizing herself from the other women in the novel. While in male company, Edna subtly denounces any similarity to other women, saying things like, “I don’t mind walking. I always feel so sorry for women who don’t like to walk; they miss so much” (Chopin 165). Although

Edna sounds earnest in her love for exploration, she is subconsciously trying to align herself with masculinity by proving to Robert that she has experienced life on the streets, which contrasts starkly with the domestic skills a woman is expected to have (Hildebrand 192). By identifying with the same masculine spaces that oppressed her in the beginning of the novella, Edna seems to dismiss her own struggle by stating that all women have the decision to walk away from domesticity and oppression. She also neglects to consider that some women may enjoy the life she is trying to flee. In contrast to Edna, Esther’s separation from her femininity takes on a more physical form. After her first shock treatment, she cannot recognize herself in the mirror: “You couldn’t tell whether the person in the picture was a man or a woman, because their hair was shaved...I smiled. The mouth in the mirror cracked into a grin” (Plath 174-175). As Plath’s protagonist protests the notion that she must forgo her own identity in order to be a wife and a mother, she ironically enough becomes guilty of “self-dismemberment”—or, the deconstruction of her own personhood (Bonds 55). She has become unrecognizable to those who knew the old Esther, but the new Esther is not ideal. Instead of being just a lost woman, she is also now aware of some of the masculine traits she encompasses. Neither Edna nor Esther has successfully rejected femininity, as both women see it through the lens of a masculine space. They would rather adopt masculine traits than find an identity that does not revolve around the gender binary.

While attempting to escape the confines of femininity, both protagonists begin to feel secluded from spaces in which they once belonged. Edna is desperate to feel a sense of belonging within her community after her awakening ostracized her, so she decides to throw herself a dinner party. However, this dinner party leads to “[a]n old sense of ennui overtaking her; the hopelessness which so often assailed her....There came over her the acute longing...overpowering her at once with a sense of the unattainable” (Chopin 145). Because Edna has dedicated so much of her time to defying male-dominated spaces, she constantly feels the need to validate her significance to a society who does not understand her (Glendening 65). Therefore, Edna’s sense of ennui directly correlates to how alienated she feels from the world around her. In this dinner scene, Edna has yet another awakening in which she learns that freedom does have a price (Glendening 58). However, she is not alone in this sense of isolation; Plath also uses metaphors of

physical space to illustrate how isolated and alone Esther feels. She describes her protagonist's isolation as if she were trapped under a bell jar in which she can see the rest of the world but is unable to communicate with it (Plath 215). By trying to free herself from gender constraints, Esther has ironically created another space in which she is further outcast and ridiculed for being different (Noriko 77). Edna and Esther may have succeeded in turning their bodies into places of liberation, yet their minds cannot escape the gender binary that male-dominated spaces have created. Therefore, it is impossible for either protagonist to find sustainable contentment; they cannot escape what has been ingrained into their minds.

Unlike the first awakening in which both characters become aware of their gender constraints, they both go through a second awakening towards the end of the novel that further proves White's concept that femininity itself is the prison which prevents these women from being content within their lives. Chopin concludes the novella with Edna walking into the sea, allowing readers to speculate on Edna's fate. Some scholars argue that the sea's reclamation is a symbolic rebirth: Edna is finally free from male-dominated spaces (Kearns 87); other scholars claim that Edna accepts her defeat because it is impossible for her to escape femininity (Tercan 681). As the sea consumes her, it is important to note that Edna chooses to reflect on the relationships that weigh on her mental health the most:

She thought of Leonce and the children. They were a part of her life. But they need not have thought they could possess her, body and soul. How Mademoiselle Reisz would have laughed....Exhaustion was pressing upon and overpowering her. 'Good-by— because I love you...' He would never understand... but it was too late; the shore was far behind her, and her strength was gone. (Chopin 176)

If readers agree with scholars like Kearns, they are not closely examining the language that Chopin deliberately uses within these concluding passages. Edna's feelings are reminiscent of the way she felt at the beginning of the novella—she still defends her desire to not allow her husband or children to “possess” her. Alongside this defense, Edna succumbs to exhaustion as the sea “overpowers” her, once again fitting into the passive role of a “motherwoman.” Therefore, Edna's thoughts do not reflect rebirth but rather entrapment in White's prison

of femininity. In this reading of *The Awakening*, Edna accepts defeat because she believes that suicide is her only option if she wants true liberation from the gender roles that confine her.

Plath's protagonist differs tremendously from Edna in this regard. Esther attends her friend Joan's funeral (yet another suicide) in which she awakens to how fickle life is: “I took a deep breath and listened to the old brag of my heart. I am, I am, I am” (Plath 243). The repetition of “I am” suggests Esther has reclaimed her body as her own. Esther becomes assertive with her identity, as her concluding thoughts redefine feminine identity: “But I wasn't getting married. There ought, I thought, to be a ritual for being born twice—patched, retreated, and approved for the road” (Plath 244). Although Esther does not have the answers on how she will exist amongst feminine constraints, Joan's suicide leads Esther to believe suicide is a “dead end” that does not actually liberate her (Budick 877). Instead, Esther acknowledges that those around her will always expect her to obey feminine standards and tries to seek other ways to celebrate a rebirth in which she believes she can find liberation. As both characters become aware of how femininity is a space of oppression, they realize it is impossible to fully escape being oppressed; however, they do not respond to this news in the same manner. Edna is full of despair and cannot continue to live a life in which she lacks bodily autonomy, while Esther takes it upon herself to celebrate her own definition of femininity.

The central conflict of these two pieces of literature stems from the oppression of middle-class white women who are fairly privileged. Although their sorrow is derived from a valid criticism of gender roles, both women are blind to how they have simultaneously played the role of both the oppressed and the oppressor. Scholars often critique that Edna's focus relies on female servitude while being oblivious to racial servitude (Dyer 149). Chopin's protagonist frequently relies on women of color throughout this novella to gain her own sense of freedom. Once she decides to move out of Mr. Pontellier's house, Edna reassures herself that her new house will be a place of “freedom and independence” because she will be able to take her Black maid Celestine with her (Chopin 134). Edna is only able to lounge around and paint all day because she has shifted her responsibilities onto Celestine. Therefore, she takes on the same oppressive role Mr. Pontellier exhibits at the beginning of the novella. Although these servants are static char-

acters who add very little to the plot, their roles suggest how difficult it is for Edna to reject societal conventions. Esther is guilty of the same behavior, as she does not attempt to sympathize with or understand the minorities within the text. The first sentences of *The Bell Jar* frame her mindset: “It was...the summer they electrocuted the Rosenbergs, and I didn’t know what I was doing in New York...and that’s all there was to read about in the papers” (Plath 1). Her dismissal of the Rosenbergs’ execution could be mistaken for a disinterest in politics; however, Esther’s racism continues throughout the book. Most noticeably, she kicks the only Black character in the shin for a simple misunderstanding during dinner (Plath 182). Even though her journey is rooted in a desire to be understood by those around her, Esther does not sympathize with the feelings of the very minorities around her. Edna and Esther ironically create a space where they treat minorities the same way that men have treated them. They remain oblivious to the oppression that they have created for others.

Scholarship surrounding *The Awakening* and *The Bell Jar* focuses on the oppression of the protagonists while neglecting to consider them as oppressors. A handful of articles exist describing how Chopin’s protagonist benefits from racist systems, while almost no scholarship takes into account Esther’s blatant racism and antisemitism throughout the novel. It is not until researching on a more macro sociological level that one can speculate as to why it is easy for scholars to ignore Plath’s protagonist’s racism. White people, scholars included, obsess over the aesthetic of sad white women because it began as a protest to the patriarchy. While in the company of men, women are expected to appear friendly and approachable. Therefore, an open expression of discontent is in its own sense a claim of bodily autonomy (Mooney 178-179). When Edna loses interest in hosting social obligations, Mr. Pontellier consults a doctor about his wife’s concern for the “eternal rights of women” (Chopin 118). Esther tells her mother it has been suggested she be admitted into a psychiatric institution (Plath 145). Both women’s withdrawal from society due to their sadness is seen as an act of rebellion by characters and scholars alike. However, this form of liberation overshadows how these characters are oppressing minorities. Dating all the way back to Du Bois is the idea that any form of white activism stems from the desire of the possession of space and place as well as expansion (Du Bois qtd. in Mooney 183). Hence, Edna

and Esther are not content with merely trying to escape the male-dominated spaces that oppress them. They need to feel their own sense of control. Edna relies on her Black maid while making the pigeon home her place (Chopin 138), and Esther gets satisfaction from harming the only Black character in her social sphere (Plath 182). Chopin and Plath’s protagonists understand that the men in their lives oppress them and thus begin to oppress minorities in order to feel a sense of power within the confines of their oppression. To further White’s analogy once again, Edna and Esther’s prison of femininity is not inclusive to the restraints women of color face. Scholars ignore these characters’ racism because their unapologetic outward expression of despair is read as an act of liberation and progressiveness; therefore, their conservative viewpoints are dismissed for the sake of being strong feminist icons.

Edna and Esther are complex characters who cannot be reduced to simple terms such as “good” or “bad.” Both protagonists become aware that they live in male-dominated spaces which come with expectations such as marriage and motherhood, and that neglecting these feminine duties negatively impacts their lives. In an attempt to find an identity outside of the prison of femininity, these women are unable to detach themselves from the gender binary; therefore, they police other women based on how strictly they adhere to the same expectations that Edna and Esther are aware oppress them. They are victims of their dreams of being able to express themselves freely outside of gender constraints. However, Edna and Esther are also guilty of oppressing minorities who are barely mentioned in either novel unless it is for the benefit of the protagonists. Specifically, Esther’s oppressing side is a topic missing from scholarship presumably because she is viewed as a progressive woman who protests the constraints of femininity. Edna and Esther do not need to be reduced to morally bad characters; rather, their complexities and abilities to fit the role of both the oppressed and the oppressor should be acknowledged in order to assess these characters more accurately.

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