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Hardship Endured by Women in the 19th Century

Equality and respect have always been a key element one’s basic rights, but many social groups have been striving to achieve it. This is especially the case for women as society have once put heavy expectations and restrictions on them, and they have only broken through the burdens from society by fighting back very hard. Kate Chopin displays the oppression that women in the past needed to endure by telling a tale about the struggles of women in the past in *The Awakening*. In this novel, Edna, the protagonist, slowly realizes her unfair position in the society, and takes action to fight back the expectations of the world on her. In *The Awakening* by Kate Chopin, women are represented by Edna, a character who fights for equality and respect in the unfair society, to demonstrate the difficulties faced my women in the 19th century: lack of identity consciousness, consequence of discrimination and hardship of rebelling against society’s demand.

Chopin demonstrates the backlashes of women’s lack of identity in the 19th century by showing how societal expectation constrains an individual’s action and ability of expression. The demands of society are often different from one’s own ideology and thus force the individual in pursuing actions which they would otherwise not do. This can be observed when Edna is “Looking at … her rings, which she had given to her husband before leaving for the beach. She silently reached out to him, and … slipped them upon her fingers.” (Chopin 3) In this example, Edna’s ring symbolizes her marriage with her husband Leoncé, and her slipping it on shows her acceptance of this relationship. However, a submissive diction “silent” is used in this quote and it suggests that pressure from society forced Edna to accept the relationship. Furthermore, the pressure from the world around an individual also restricts one’s ability of expression. This is conveyed when Leoncé told Edna “but don’t let the family go to the devil,” (Chopin 87) as effort to persuade Edna to spend less time painting. Painting is a symbol of freedom to Edna, allowing her to express her feelings. However, Leoncé in this example directly interferes with Edna’s ability to paint by putting the expectations of society on a higher importance by reminding Edna of her responsibility as a mother. Hence showing the limits on one’s ability of expression due to societal demand. This combined with the limitation on one’s ability to act establishes the theme of the difficulties faced by women.

Apart from the expectation from society, discrimination also brings significant consequences, as it decreases understanding from family members and the society. Living under the sexist condition, discrimination cuts the understanding from even family members. This is evident when Leoncé “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.” (Chopin 7) This example shows how Leoncé only views Edna as his property that is supposed please him through its context. This combined with diction used such as “sole object” shows Leoncé’s careless attitude toward Edna, thus showing the lack of understanding from family members received by women. The careless attitude is carried on by the society, as society also shows a lack of understanding of women. This is shown in the conversation of Leoncé and the doctor, when the doctor said “Woman … is a very peculiar and delicate organism … Most women are moody and whimsical.” (Chopin 101) In this quote, the doctor represents society, and he uses a very specific diction when talking about women which gives an idea of how to society views woman. The word “organism” shows that the doctor does not view woman as a human being, and the word “whimsical” picture them as uneducated and stupid. This example therefore shows that the society underestimates woman’s ability, and does not give them enough recognition for their ability. This combined with the lack of recognition from family woman receives shows the lack of mental support woman have, thus displaying the consequences of discrimination.

To add on the consequences of discrimination, women also face back-lashes for rebelling against the society, as it isolates them in a dangerous position and is hard to achieve success. When fighting societal demands, women are often isolated from support and put into a dangerous situation. This can be seen when Edna “grew daring and reckless” and “she wanted to swim far out, where no woman had swum before” In the awakening, ocean is a motif for freedom, as it appears multiple times, and that makes Edna swimming symbolize the action of woman fighting against societal demand. However, Edna is “far out … where no woman had swum before”, showing that he is isolated from everyone else in the dangerous ocean far from shore. Furthermore, it is also hard to achieve success when fighting against pressure of society as an individual. Chopin shows this by using the “Pigeon house” to symbolize the results which Edna have achieved. To Edna, the pigeon house represents freedom, as it “relieves” her “from obligations”. However, despite the significance of the pigeon house in Edna’s heart, it is only a small home. Leoncé wants to redesign it and even Edna gets “a feeling of having descended in the social scale,” showing the large amount of consequences of this improvement, thus showing the difficulty of achieving success. As shown above, rebelling against society is difficult as it isolates one in a dangerous position, and is difficult to achieve success.

Ultimately, Kate Chopin displays the hardship endured by woman in the 19th century through the development of the consequences of lack of identity consciousness, discrimination and rebelling against demand of society. While the situation has become a lot better for woman in the recent years, discrimination still remains as a significant problem. Society should spend more effort on achieving equality on social groups to make the world a better place for everyone to live in.

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# Work Cited

ChopinKate. *The Awakening*. Herbert S. Stone & Company, 1899.