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The Limited Space of Woman in Kate Chopin’s *The Awakening*

The ideal of expected femininity was strictly enforced by society in the 19th century. Conceptions of the feminine ideal stem back to Queen Victorian’s reign and how it influenced not only British culture but American culture as well. American culture in the latter half of the 19th century was dominated by European traditions especially in Louisiana. In Louisiana formed an elite society of Creoles, white people of French or Spanish descent, who had strict expectations of their women; limiting their roles to mothers and wives. However, Creole women at the time, while fully domesticated, exhibited a freer manner of speech regarding their sexuality and feelings although they were still their husband’s property. This paper will argue that Kate Chopin’s *The Awakening* serves as an example of how a foreigner of the Creole culture is stupefied by it and easily confused between the freedoms of an American woman and the freedoms of a Creole wife. The feminine Creole oscillation between flirtation and domestication creates confusion for the foreign woman which, in Edna Pontellier’s case, leads to isolation, emotional dependencies, and even symbolic suicide.

As the novel opens we are introduced to Edna and Léonce Pontellier while they are in Grand Isle. Chopin notes early on that there was a “main building…called “the house” to distinguish it from the cottages” (Chopin 521) showing that in this society there are clear separations between class. What is remarkable about the scene is that Edna is not by her husband’s side but with another man, young Robert Lebrun, and her husband is unbothered by it. Before the cottages were filled with exclusive visitors the Lebrun’s were able to enjoy the main house as a luxury and the present separation establishes Robert Lebrun as inferior to Léonce and wishing to possess what Léonce owns; his wife most notably. Despite Edna’s freedom to socialize with other men and although her marriage allows her to be part of the elite she is still only looked at by her husband as a “valuable piece of property” (522). Edna is an inadequate wife because she is uninterested in the things “which concerned [Léonce] and valued so little his conversation” (525). Yet there is also another reason why Edna, as an American wife, is unsatisfactory to her Creole husband: “She was an American woman, with a small infusion of French which seemed to have been lost in dilution” (525). The small infusion of French descent is expected to enact a special servitude and chasteness from a woman whose innate role is that of a mother and wife, but Edna Pontellier is far too American to embody these roles perfectly.

In his article titled “Secrets and Lies: Race and Sex in the Awakening” scholar James O’Rourke argues that Chopin’s novel “extends George Washington Cable’s critique of the hypocrisy of the “white” creole society of New Orleans on racial and sexual matters” (169). In the novel Chopin displaces the assumed sexual liberty of the colored woman and attaches it to the white woman. The colored woman’s sexuality is depicted as a commodity through Robert’s interactions with Mariequita or the stunning girls he meets in Mexico (638). Mariequita walks around town shoeless but her sexuality is shown to be innocent in that she does not expect anything from the Lebrun brothers. Equally, both brothers seem to play around with Mariequita and feel that they “had some sort of claim upon [her]” (Chopin 576) which was devoide of any accountability. In contrast to Mariequita and other minority women, Edna has the luxury to pick and choose who she wishes to engage with, and she has the ability of being an artist and living independently while still retaining the support of her husband. Edna aspires to an elevated sense of liberty that is not a performance but rather a reality. O’Rourke believes that Edna attributes her failure in the end to her “vastly [overromanticizing] of the life of the woman who exists outside the law and whose survival depends upon her sexual allure” (175) however, I propose instead that there could be another reason for Edna’s perceived failure: her romantic emotional dependency or the tricking nature of her social condition.

Although Chopin’s intention is to place both races of women on equal footing the only possible equality between the white and colored woman is through their roles as mothers. O’Rourke agreed with Emily Toth’s statement that motherhood linked women together across the color line (169) but this is questionable because the colored woman’s motherhood is never quite explored in the text. The racial difference between Edna and the colored women of the novel also have to do with Edna’s privilege and ability to establish herself as an artist. Moreover, the motherhood of the colored woman is assumed just like her sexuality is assumed and the only judgement on white motherhood begins with the stark differences between Edna and Adele Ratignolle’s and her chronic urges to think of the children. Motherhood is the staple of domestication for the Creole woman and it is a duty that Edna struggles with. Another reason why Edna’s husband disapproves of her is because he “reproached…her inattention, her habitual neglect of the children” (526). The noted neglect is not only acknowledged by Léonce but also by Edna herself although she never fully explains why she disregards her children so. When referring to her children Edna says, “she was fond of her children in an uneven, impulsive way. She would sometimes gather them passionately to her heart; she would sometimes forget them” (541). Edna blames fate for assigning an unbefitting role and she feels trapped by the exacting expectations.

Edna’s clash with the traditional woman is largely attributed to her lack of being a “mother-woman” (529) and she therefore clashes against the Creole culture whose “women…idolized their children, worshipped their husbands, and esteemed it a holy privilege to efface themselves as individuals and grow wings as ministering angels” (529). The Creole woman is not self-serving, and she is compared to a ministering angel which is always available and ready to perform a selfless act. While the society of the Creoles was more demanding than Edna’s American society, the women were still allowed to enjoy a potential freedom through various flirtations. The Creole woman is also depicted as more in control of her feelings and she is emotionally competent enough to understand that the value of company or of admiration outside of her own marriage is never something that would successfully materialize. The coquetry of the Creole woman is largely tied to her chastity. Chopin writes, “Their freedom of expression was at first incomprehensible to her, though she had no difficulty in reconciling it with a lofty chastity which in the Creole woman seems to be inborn and unmistakable” (530). The Creole women have a strength of character that defines clearly what is allowable in their society and to what extent they are allowed to push the law of marriage.

Chopin makes the affirmation that the Creole husband is never jealous which allows the Creole wife the opportunity to enjoy another man’s company, nevertheless to a foreign woman like Edna, this interaction results in complicated feelings and a yearning for something more. Edna is mystified by the interactions of the people around her not realizing the impossibility of a union with Robert- he might love her, but you do not marry another man’s wife. Edna’s downward spiral would not be so cruel if her difference was not so plainly noted by Adele: “She is not one of us; she is not like us. She might make the unfortunate blunder of taking you seriously” (542). Adele herself also seems to manipulate Edna’s feelings and to encourage the loosening of physical affection which is not at first sexual. Chopin writes, “Madame Ratignolle laid her hand over that of Mrs. Pontellier…seeing that the hand was not withdrawn, she clasped it firmly and warmly. She even stroked it a little, fondly” (539). Edna shares her confusion at Adele’s sudden action, but she quickly assents to it because she wishes to belong to a culture that can never accept her.

Molly J. Hildebrand states in her essay titled “The Masculine Sea: Gender, Art, and Suicide in Kate Chopin’s *The Awakening*” that another way in which Edna desires freedom is through her insertion into the masculine artistic framework. However, the masculine privileges that Edna seeks will never be fully given to her and Hildebrand purports that Edna’s forceful inscription into the masculine framework results in her suicide. I would disagree with Hildebrand in this case because if the novel truly values the feministic aesthetic then it should not reject or caution the female reader against seeking advanced liberties. There are dangers to the quest for independence and these are often emotional punishments which are inflicted upon the transgressor by the community. An example of an emotional lash back is Robert’s indifference towards Edna and his ability to leave her behind. Edna is always at the cusp of achieving her desired goal and in the end almost seems to convince Robert to run away with her, but his male judgment is volatile, and he deserts her once more. Unable to attain the object of her desire Edna feels betrayed by a society of people who enabled her personal pursuits while also knowing that she would ultimately fail. The glimmer of a passionate reward slipping away from her fingers weakens Edna and she decides to wash away into the sea; her sole triumph. The suicide becomes a form of inextinguishable gumption, of an escape, and of an alternative narrative that owes nothing to others.

Hildebrand argues that Edna’s suicide is melodramatic and shallow because it does not focus on the true elimination of oppression, but Chopin’s work also has to be regarded as a feminine text and one which is also of popular subject matter; a work of fiction. There are ways for an author to delineate a female’s quest for individuality, but these often involve the integration of the character into the male sphere. Hildebrand’s declaration that “by seeking and claiming masculine privilege [Edna] associates with artistry…[she] perpetuates the system of female subjugation” (193) tempts me to ask what Edna’s other options were. The inhabitation of the male arena and of the colored woman’s space are both necessary for Edna to negotiate the terms of her womanhood and reach a similar power as that of the Creole man. The novel is not precisely a call for social action but more of an example of how precarious it can be to inhabit an unfamiliar or limited space. Edna’s suicide is not petulant but is more of the consequence of loneliness and of failed expectations. Edna’s unexplored sexuality prevents her from seeing the male relationships she develops as the playthings that they are, and her deepened sense of confusion and moral ambivalence prevents her from being the idealistic heroine which advocates for the entire gender.

There is a certain loneliness that pervades in Edna’s heart and while scholars like Hildebrand associate loneliness with the masculine and suicide as avoidance there is another dimension to solitude that must be explored. I challenge the idea that personal freedom and the desire to be alone is not solely a male-centered concept because artistic freedom is something that both genders desire and one need not eliminate the other to exist. There is also an emotional aspect that needs to be considered in the analysis of Edna’s experience because sometimes unhappiness is inexplicable, and it is unfair to attach unexplained dissatisfaction to a trope of white feminine privilege. Chopin facilitates the audience’s sympathy towards Edna because her bouts of solitary misery in an unhappy marriage are relatable. Late at night Léonce comes home and awakens his wife only to accost her. Edna feels dissatisfied in her marriage and when she is alone she often cries. Chopin writes, “She could not have told why she was crying. Such experiences as the as the foregoing were not uncommon in her married life” (527).

Researchers like Keyne C. Law and Raymond P. Tucker are useful for the interpretation of Edna’s condition and subsequent suicide outside of a political agenda or literary framework. In their study titled “Repetitive negative thinking and suicide: a burgeoning literature with need for further exploration” Law and Tucker assert that repetitive negative thinking and rumination or worry leads to suicidal ideation and a higher risk of attempting suicide. The study also suggests that there is a causal relationship between reminiscing on past negative events and suicide. Keyne and Tucker write, “the effect of rumination on suicide attempts may be amplified by the impulsive use of painful and provocative behaviors to cope with the negative emotionality generated by the ruminative process” (69). In Robert’s absence Chopin says that Edna “missed him the days when some pretext served to take him away from her, just as one misses the sun on a cloudy day without having thought much about the sun when it was shining” (Chopin 551). Edna’s obsession with Robert develops hastily and she imagines that her true happiness lies with him while also realizing the differentiation between lust and love but still falling victim to its intensity. Upon Robert’s absence Edna begins to enact the impulsive and provocative behaviors Keyne and Tucker discuss in their study especially with the development of her relationship with Alcee Arobin and her reckless desire to “swim far out, where no woman had swum before” (551).

The proposition that thinking about the past and that ruminating leads to suicidal ideation is fitting to the analysis of *The Awakening* because Edna, after Robert leaves for Mexico, is said to have “sought him everywhere- in others whom she induced to talk about him” (573). Inciting others around her to talk about Robert is a form of rumination that disables Edna from moving on with her life and searching for personal fulfillment individually and without the promise of a romantic relationship. Keyne and Tucker also mention the Interpersonal Theory of Suicide which “posits that an increased fearlessness of death…is required to make a lethal suicide attempt” (70) as well as recurring visions of death. Edna exhibits a fearlessness of death and encounters imagery associated with death and suicide: “A quick vision of death smote her soul, and for a second of time appalled and enfeebled her senses” (Chopin 552) which is actually Edna’s first attempt at drowning. The first attempt scares Edna but she eventually creates a soothing image of the sea and its “seductive odor” (533) and of the power of a personally enforced solitude which is permanent.

Edna’s endurance of heartbreak is intensified when she realizes that the “parcel of an alien world…had suddenly become antagonistic” (582) and her infatuation with Robert leads her to a destructive state where she feels the need to “destroy something” (581) so she can forget “the spell of her infatuation” (583). It is difficult for Edna to forget Robert and because her heart is spited she resorts to the Don Juan of New Orleans, Alcee Arobin. After a prolonged exposure to the foreign culture Edna begins to disregard even further the duties she has as a Creole wife and at the same time also discredits her American background as well. It is likely that due to Edna’s depressed and ruminative state that she has breached past her moral code. This is insinuated when Edna begins to be intimate with Alcee and Chopin remarks, “She felt somewhat like a woman who in a moment of passion is betrayed into an act of infidelity and realizes the significance of the act without being wholy awakened from its glamour” (610). Edna’s dismissal of guilt reveals the libertine moral and sexual state that she finds herself in which cements the otherness of an unknown culture and the confusing but transformative effect that it can have on an upper middle class woman of the 19th century.

Individual female independence is a concept that is valued by Edna but not by either of the cultures which she inhabits. The Creole culture allows Edna to toy with the idea that she is free and viably desirable, and the American culture allows her to be an artist, but both suppress a full emancipation from a male union. Edna’s attempts at a solitary life, the life of a recluse genius, does take a masculine encasing because she depends upon the male economy to secure independence. At one point Edna shares that she has “a little money of my own…I won a large sum this winter on the races, and I am beginning to sell my sketches. Laidpore is more and more pleased with my work; he says it grows in force and individuality” (613). However, this is a male approval and Edna is still dependent on the support of a man to secure her success. Edna can and is judged for giving into the enactment of masculine qualities and the utilization of male support to achieve an intended goal but it all resorts to the impossibility of another option. How else could Mrs. Pontellier succeed?

The failure of Edna’s venture is not largely due to unrealistic expectations but rather to an incomplete analysis of what brings happiness to an individual. Regardless of her flawed construction of reality Edna is strong of her conviction to remain the controller of her soul and of keeping her idea of self intact. When explaining her character to Adele, Edna tells her that she would “never sacrifice herself for her children, or for any one” (575) meaning that she would give up her life or her money for her family but not her whole sense of self which is described as “only something which I am beginning to comprehend, which is revealing itself to me” (575). Part of the confusion and culture shock that comes through Edna’s positioning in Louisiana involves an evolution of herself or an awakening as a being separate from the suppressive and carefully delineated duties of mother and wife. There is an integral part of a person which is part of who he/she is that should never be relinquished to anyone.

Edna eventually does partially sacrifice herself for someone else because she commits suicide after Robert abandons her one last time. Edna was unable to retain self-control because she was stuck in the past and of her inability to alter things that were out of her control. To understand why Edna’s emotions blinded her sense of judgement are two study trials conducted by psychological researchers Minkung Kwon and Youngiee Han. In their study called “How Love and Lust Influence Self-Control,” Kwon and Han argue that when individuals are primed with love they are less likely to choose an unhealthy option due to the long-term effects whereas when an individual is primed with lust he/she is more likely to choose the unhealthy option. Han and Kwon cite fellow researchers Woolley and Fishbach and their claim that “*self-control* appears in situations in which individuals face the choice between a virtuous option consistent with their long-term goals and an indulgent option that undermines such goals but gives immediate gratification” (177). Edna’s definition of a virtuous option at this point in the story is deluded because she has been intoxicated with the façade of the Creole womanhood’s sexual openness which is illusionary.

However, it is plausible that like Han and Kwon propose, when an individual is thinking of the present “they choose an option with immediate gratification; [and] when they focus on the future, they prefer an option with long-term benefits” (177-178). This notion is complicated because the only option available to Edna is that of the present; the forbidden action that yields no promise of the future but merely a physical gratification. Short-term goals are noted by Han and Kwon as being attached to lust and sexual desire where “lust is ruled by a sexual mating system that is unrelated to relationship formation or long-term bonding” (178). Edna could not have possibly loved Robert because love “stirs up a part of the brain that responds to rational enjoyment” (178) which Edna lacks in most of her encounters with him. As part of her awakening Edna’s rediscovery of herself is also highly sexual which hinders her self-control. In one scene Chopin describes Edna’s kiss with Alcee as the “first kiss of her life to which her nature had really responded. It was a flaming torch that kindled desire” (617).

*The Awakening* as a literary text has also been argued to be naturalistic fiction due to its attribution to the environment as a determiner for human behavior. If Edna’s awakening is reduced to the plain and rational biological process it is probable that her desire to satisfy a sexual curiosity outside of her marriage stems out of a primal instinct or curiosity for the forbidden or the unknown. Dr. Mandelet is the only character in the novel who voices his sincere opinion to Edna and tries to reduce her female sexual feelings to the gimmicks of nature. Dr. Mandelet says to Edna that desire seems to be a “provision of Nature; a decoy to secure mothers for the race. And Nature takes no account of moral consequences” (650). The rational aspect of sexuality and the need to flaunt a woman’s sex before a man lies in the “ever new and curious story of the waning of a woman’s love, seeking strange, new channels, only to return to its legitimate source after days of fierce unrest” (602). It is a primal instinct to seek new adventures, but this is sometimes a direct result of a lack of love that secedes after a few days once the object of desire is obtained and the safety of a husband, even one whom a woman does not love, proves to be of more rational value than a sexual experience devoid of long-term benefits.

Another aspect of the novel which poses it as a piece of naturalistic fiction is the explanation of Edna’s position as subservient due to the nature of her sex. In “A Note on Kate Chopin’s The Awakening as Naturalistic Fiction” Donald Pizer maintains that the “simple meaning” of the novel needs to be kept in the forefront before any work of debate is based off of it. Pizer uses his essay to show how *The Awakening* is a form of naturalistic fiction because it deals with the limitations imposed on free will by an individual’s biological and social realities. Pizer further declares that “Chopin indeed does reject some of Darwin’s ideas about women’s passivity…but she also accepts the basic principles of Darwinian natural and sexual selection” (6). Pizer mentions Darwin’s explanation of the basic social instincts with particular regard for the maternal nature and how if disobeyed “leads to the deepest misery” (7). As a naturalistic text its ending does support a biological fate that punishes a woman for not being motherly enough; the prime example of this is that Edna’s fate is anything but fortunate.

Furthermore, although it is unclear whether Edna’s motherly emotional obligations stem from a biological imperative or accepting an unconscious social norm, Pizer says that even if Edna can reject the model of ideal motherhood, which Adele evinces, she is still “incapable of resisting emotions of obligation toward her children” (7). This is a logical assumption because as Edna submerges herself into the water she thinks of her children and of her husband. Pizer also brings to the reader’s attention the complexity of Robert’s morals and why a relationship with Edna was out of the question. Pizer writes of Robert’s “impermissible affair with a married woman- permissible and impermissible, that is, within the Creole code of a gentleman, which is Robert’s operative code” (8). Because Robert is well versed in the Creole society of what is allowed and prohibited he is able to walk the confusing line between innocuous involvement and a life altering affair, which is something that Edna is unable to do. The staple of the text’s naturalism lies in Edna’s inability to “overcome the hold which biology of motherhood and the social codes of marriage have…on her emotions…and actions” (11). Pizer concludes his essay by attributing Edna’s failure to limitations of her womanly condition in a world deeply ruled by the natural and social worlds they inhabit (12).

Critic Francesco Pontuale exacts in his essay titled “’The Awakening’: Struggles Toward l’ecriture Feminine,” that *The Awakening* can be read as an early example of the American version of “feminine l’ecriture”, defined by Helene Cixous as “feminine writing” concerned with the repossession of the female body. Pontuale explores Edna’s struggle against the oppressiveness of Creole standards to regain her body and her womanhood. Pontuale expands upon the inception of the Southern woman as expected to “conform to strict feminine gender codes…confined to the social straitjacket of “the lady” (40) who completely lacks sexual desires or drives. There is also the struggle of readership of the text at the onset of its publication as the subject matter was appalling to the societal norms of the time and Chopin, like Edna, experienced remonstrance for their embracement of a female sexuality: “The high price that Edna pays for her fleeting sexual and social liberation was shared by the novel itself when, in 1899, it met with a hostile reception’ (39). Even so, the value of an American feminine writing surpassed its presumed vulgarity and there is an interesting comparison that Pontuale makes between Edna and the sea which symbolized the fluid nature of woman.

Pontuale’s further writing of Edna’s desire to “merge with the sea” (44) is intrinsic to her metamorphosis because the sea is what ultimately liberates Edna from a life of societal oppression. The sea also allows for the sexual liberation of the female in Chopin’s view as she writes that “the voice of the sea is seductive; never ceasing, whispering, clamoring, murmuring, inviting the soul to wander for a spell in abysses of solitude; to lose itself in mazes of inward contemplation. The voice of the sea speaks to the soul. The touch of the sea…[enfolds] the body in its soft, close embrace” (535). From this description it is as if the connection between Edna and the water is the connection of two female forms which encourage the possibility of a new woman who is self-sufficient and unchained from male imposition. Before Edna commits suicide she decides to enter the water naked and in full embrace of the environment before her: “she was there beside the sea, absolutely alone…she stood naked in the open air, at the mercy of the sun, the breeze that beat upon her, and the waves that invited her” (654). The image drawn for the audience depicts a complete surrender to nature and to the full embrace of Edna’s female body as finally her own. Edna can be a mother and a wife but her husband and children “need not have thought that they could possess her, body and soul” (654-655).

A concise reflection of Chopin’s novel which covers themes of the feminine ideal, the different labels of its literary genre, and of the toxic expectations of Creole society on women reveals the perplexities of being a woman of one’s own; a creature with demands and feelings that promulgate the advancement of the gender. A confliction between societies with varying degrees of repression can lead a woman into a state of confusion, isolation, and even suicide. However, the suicide is not always an act of cowardice. Sharmita Lahiri in “Not a Vanquished Rebel but a Successful Explorer of Newer Realms: A Study of Edna Pontellier in Chopin’s The Awakening” purports that Edna’s suicide was not a form of weakness or submission but a bold act of rebellion. Instead of conforming to the expected feminine ideal standard that was expected of her, Edna chose to end her own life and in this way obtain her freedom. Lahiri writes that Edna’s “swimming out into the sea is not a desperate act of self-destruction of a vanquished rebel [but]..an exploration of newer spaces and of a new alternative for women- the alternative of noncompliance” (61) even if these spaces are limited.

Lahiri admits that “the Creole society of New Orleans [makes] the role of a wife [as] largely ceremonial. Her physical beauty and accessories [bearing] evidence of her husband’s material prosperity” (62) which is exactly how Léonce views his wife. To further this claim is Léonce’s actions after Edna chooses to move out into her own cottage and he strives to keep appearances for the sake of his reputation. There was nothing worse in this society than a man who was unable to control or keep his wife. Divorce was out of the question and when a marriage was based off of public opinion it was almost impossible for the wife to harbor sincere feelings of love and respect or even a faithful duty. Lahiri also notes that motherhood implicitly links itself to sexuality and that there should not be a separation between the two labels as they are intrinsic to one another; conceptions are not immaculate in the Creole world so why pretend otherwise? Another useful point of Lahiri’s argument is her assertion that “Edna’s expectation of something more than just material bounties from her husband indicates her distance from the Creole woman” (64) where Edna has managed to partially include herself in the society yet still lives on the fringes of the society. The Creole women do not understand Edna and as is natural to most societies they shun what they do not understand.

There exists two extremes in which Edna could fall under and because she is not Adele she has the potential of becoming Mademoiselle Reisz whose music “stirs Edna’s soul, and makes viable the conflict between her desire for independence and the restricting conventions of Creole Louisiana which confine her” (Lahiri 65). Edna’s confinement materializes in her ability to swim where in the beginning she is fearful and unsure but as she experiences her awakening she also attains the ability to meet the sea with the agency of her identity. Edna is also not Mademoiselle Reisz because she is not the culmination of the ascetic artist that a woman rejecting tradition conveys. Lahiri writes that Edna “carves out her own feminine niche [through] experiments with different roles. She becomes masculine and feminine at once” (67) and her swimming out to the sea is just as defiant and as meaningful as her relocation to the pigeon house because it allows for the “creating of a new alternative, a new paradigm for a woman” (68).

The crutch of Edna’s failings is not blind love because although “romantic love for Robert had been the catalyst for her awakening…her fantasy love for him is an extension of her adolescent infatuations” (68) thus making Edna’s true awakening a rebirth from her childlike self and an exemplification of the trope of unfulfilled desire: “it seemed to her as if life were passing by, leaving its promise broken and unfulfilled” (Chopin 606). However, “Edna’s awakening is essentially limited in its scope because…Edna fails to comprehend it fully and to identify the precise nature of her discontent” ( Lahiri 68). Without being able to totally comprehend the root of her dissatisfaction and unable to fit into one clear category or the other, as Edna dies she recalls Mademoiselle Reisz and her unforgiving belief that “the artist must possess the courageous soul that dares and defies…and you call yourself an artist?” (655). I venture to say that Edna’s final act is courageous and defiant of the Creole culture which chewed her up and then spit her out once she was no longer a source of entertainment because suicide guaranteed Edna a state of perfect solitude that was her own. Edna’s final act of defiance regardless of its root cause or its various explicit interpretations has but one final meaning which is surmised in the words of Virginia Woolf: “There is no gate, no lock, no bolt that you can set upon the freedom of my mind” (“A Room of One’s Own”).

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