Opression Of Women In Literature Essay, Research Paper

The following paper is in regard to Mary Wollstonecraft?s novel Maria, or the Wrongs of Women and Kate Chopin?s novel titled The Awakenings. The two stories have a similar plot and both discuss the oppression of women in the institution of marriage. This paper will include how the two main characters in each story, Maria (in Maria) and Edna (in The Awakenings) challenge the oppressive ideology by finding a new love and how they also encountered problems as long the way.

Edna?s Marriage

?It was when the face and figure of great tragedian began to haunt her imagination and stir her senses. The persistence of the infatuation lent it an aspect of genuineness. The hopelessness of it colored it with the lofty tones of a great passion.? (Awakening?s, 1026) A passion that ultimately lost its novelty and was allocated to the shelf that held obscure yet relaxed delightful remembrances. The tragedian keeps fellowship with a visiting cavalry officer and an engaged gentleman. Though, in reality, the gentleman is probably no longer engaged, he will remain so in the mind of Edna Pontellier: one of the images of the infatuations of a ?little miss.”(1026) With respect to her marriage to Leonce Pontellier, Edna is inhibited, not with the man himself, but with the concept he represents. When leaving Mississippi on Leonce?s arm, she defied her family?s wish that she marries a non-Catholic. Cast to that equation a healthy dose of flattery from her intended and their union is as good as cemented. This is how Edna comes to be ensconced in the inescapable institution of marriage. One would presume that the speaking of the vows would discontinue her youthful allure, but that is not the case. Both the holy bounds of wedlock and the remonstrations of society hail to constrict her. Edna Pontellier experiences one last great infatuation. However, this beat upon her soul reverberates into a feeling that far surpasses what she had previously thought to be ?the climax of her fate.? (1026) The single-tired fantasies of her youth are replaced with a sentiment that matures in nature as her awakening proceeds. Edna realizes that her marriage is not making her happy anymore. She no longer wants to be treated as property. ?You are burnt?he added, looking at his wife as one looks at a valuable piece of personal property which has suffered some damage,? (1014). Edna is upset; every thing she?s longed for has become nothing but a joke. She soon begins her so-called ?feminine protest? by not responding to her husband?s questions. ?She said nothing, and refused to answer her husband when he questioned her.? (1017) She begins to find herself by realizing her position on earth as a human being, rather then a piece of her husband?s property. This realization is done by the feelings her had for Robert. Robert it seems made her feel human. ?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.? (1022)

Maria?s Marriage

In the primary stages of the novel there is not very much description of Maria?s marriage to George. The novel starts off with Maria thinking about her child and she is in her chamber in the madhouse. Immediately we are informed of her feelings for her husband, ?Was it not to effect her escape, to fly to the succour of her child, and to baffle the selfish schemes of her tyrant ? her husband?? (8) Primarily, the reader is uniformed of exactly what type of marriage was possessed by the couple. The only aspect that is clear is that Maria?s husband was able to convince society that Maria was mad and she was put into the madhouse and he was left with their children and all her money and possessions. It is clear that Maria?s problem with the marriage was that she wasn?t being treated equally, ?Was not the world a vast prison, and women born slaves.? (11) It seems that Maria is not bothered by her marriage being a failure; there is more evidence that she misses her child and is deeply wounded by that fact that her baby will not grow up with a mother as she did, ?The loss of her babe was the tender sting; against other cruel remembrances she labored to steel her bosom;? (14). It is only later on in the story that Maria opens up about what happened to her marriage. She explains how they grew apart and how much of the growing apart had to do with money, ?I tried now to improve my husband?s taste?and all the charms of youth were vanishing with its vivacity.? (77) The commonality between Maria and Edna is that they were both unhappy with their marriages because of the disgraceful way they were treated within them. In Maria?s case her husband was able to put a stop to her protest by sending her to the mental institution but in Edna?s case she drives herself to her death before she can even be put in one. Another similarity amongst Maria and Edna is the fact that their children mean a great deal to them. They are both concerned with being proper mothers but are both in positions were they are unable to meet up to their standards.

Edna?s Journey

Upon the occasion of a summer escape to the Lebrun family pension on Grand Isle, Edna finds herself the object of another?s affection. Most of those having stayed at the pension before assure that the young man, Robert Lebrun, is notorious for becoming a fixture to a different woman at Grand Isle each summer. In this particular season, Edna is the sole recipient of his company. Together, they bathe at the shore and tour the sights. Robert is a constant companion, whether it is to retrieve a shawl or to lend himself as an easy conversationalist. They seem to compliment each other: each experiences the most pleasant moments when in the other?s company. Edna becomes more and more at ease being in the company of a man other then her husband. Their intimacy is so apparent that at least one observer wonders if something more then a friendship is brewing. The angelic Adele Ratignolle voices her opinion that should Robert not quit in his attentions, ?she (Edna) might make the mistake of taking you seriously.? (1027) At this, the defendant fires back with an uncharacteristically sharp retort: ?Why shouldn?t she take me seriously?? I hope she has discernment enough to find in me something besides the blagueur.? (1027) From inference of remarks made about past events, we can gather that Robert has not felt so deeply for any of the other women to whom he has attached himself in years past. However, things may progress no further than this point of casual friendship. Edna has always been a proprietary being. At this junction she could not fathom a betrayal of her filial responsibilities, though she has begun to question the state in which her life caries on. ?A certain light was beginning to dawn dimly within her, – the light which, showing the way, forbids it.? (1022)

Maria?s Journey

Maria?s journey is much longer and harder then that of Edna?s. Since she has been denied any access to her baby and she is put in a dismal, discouraging chamber she a great deal of irrational emotions she had to overcome before jumping into another relationship. Besides the fact that she was still legally married and unable to start another relationship on the legal grounds of adultery. When Maria reads the books that Jemima lend to her, she seems more then happy to know that there is someone in the institution with the same tastes as she. She even ponders the thought of them being together before they even meet or converse, ?Of what use could I be to him, or her to me, if it be true that he is unjustly confined?? (20) It is evident that she automatically relates to him by hearing that he is in the same boat as she is, and she jumps to the thought of escaping together. Once again Maria is discouraged when she realizes that she is expecting too much from this ?unknown? (20), ?She was ashamed at feeling disappointed?and how difficult it was for women to avoid growing romantic, who have no active duties or pursuits.? (20) Maria, at first seems to be saddened by the writing to Darnford, it?s almost as if it brings out the wretchedness of the chamber and her life living in it, ?Writing to Darnford, she was led from the sad objects before her, and frequently rendered insensible to the horrid noises around her?to the grand source of human corruption.” (25) As time surpasses Maria and Darnford begin to see each other and it seems as though Maria?s perspective of the asylum is not as dismal as when she was first rendered there. She begins to feel strong emotions for Darnford as he does for her. Darnford even pursues to kiss Maria but Maria denies him the pleasure but with hesitance in the end actually does kiss him, ?Maria stood near the chair, to approach her lips with a declaration of love. She drew back with solemnity, he hung down his head abashed?He took, with more ardor, reassured, a half-consenting, half-reluctant kiss,? (34). As time goes on Maria?s story is told. How her mother died and Maria as a newborn was left to die. It is evident that this is tearing Maria up inside because she has now left her child (although in her case it was done involuntarily), ?Left in dirt, to cry with cold and hunger till I was weary.? (37) Slowly it is discovered that Maria is aware of sentimental education and the logic of emotions, ?My uncle realized, by good luck?which by the world are indefinitely termed romantic.? (61-62) Maria?s journey continues with her opening up to Darnford about her marriage and what exactly went wrong, ?The marriage state is certainly that in which women, ?had a title to disregard general rules.? (89) As this happens Maria and Darnford get closer and he as well opens up his feelings to her.

Edna?s Love

Edna?s feelings for Robert do not graduate to the second stage. Rather, an abrupt thrust causes the leap from appreciation of his presence to a marked yearning for it. Following the splendid Sunday on which the two spent the day by themselves, Edna seats herself at a dinner table at which controversy prevails. Robert has, in the only hours he did not spend with Edna, decided to travel to Mexico City at the request of an associate. The dinner scene illustrates each attendant?s reaction to the news, except Edna?s. It is not until after the strained good-bye between the two that we are afforded the full effect of her despair. ?Edna bit her handkerchief convulsively, striving to hold back and to hide. For the first time she recognized anew the symptoms of infatuation which she had felt as a child.? (1047) It was to become her new companion, accompanying her back to the mainland. More enthralled with his existence than ever before, the longing for his presence shadows her, to which she had been accustomed, for ?absence makes the heart grow fonder.? She rambles along the streets of New Orleans tormented by this obsession, as if it were a fever. Conversations and quips replay in her head. The concept that he exists somewhere other than at her side elevates the sense of wretched emptiness. At other times she is attacked by a wave of fatigue, a frustration that seems to know no bounds. It comes in waves, washing all motivation from her being.

Maria?s Love

Maria?s love for Darnford is quite like Edna?s love for Robert. The two women were both in the type of love that one would categorize as ‘rebound love’. Maria, as noted earlier, seems to have a strong interest for Darnford before they even communicated. As they are acquainted with each other the love seems to grow stronger and stronger even under the circumstances that they have been both prescribed as clinically mad and they supposed to be unable to communicate on the level that they preceded. Maria challenged the law against adultery for women, she protested that her husband was no longer George Venables it was now Mr. Darnford. For a woman to risk her life, of what is left of it, to be able to be with the man she loves shows that she has a strong passion for him and what she believes in. There was evidently some fear within them but the love seem to eliminate it, ?With Darnford she did not taste uninterrupted felicity; there was a volatility in his manner which often distressed her, but love gladdened the scene; besides, he was the most tender, sympathizing creature in the world.? (127) Her love for him is described like a scene from a poem, it?s as if it is too good to be true, ?Poets have imagined scenes of bliss…? (128) Maria and Darnford?s relationship is a little different now then the relationship of Edna and Robert. There seems to be an undying passion for Darnford from Maria and Edna seemed a little reluctant with Robert. There is evidence that it was because of her children but also because she loved herself. In Maria?s case she seems to only be concentrating on Darnford and their freedom. The mentioning of Maria?s children is not as frequent as it was before the meeting of Darnford, unlike the reoccurring mentioning of Edna?s children.

Edna?s Self Discovery

You are purposely misunderstanding me, ma reine. Are you in love with Robert?? ?Yes, said Edna.? (1075) This initiates the final stage of Edna?s regard toward Robert: love, and all that comes with it. From the moment she puts voice to thought, she is possessed of senses of happiness and self-reliance. Whoever’s path happen to cross hers notice the joyousness of her expression as she takes determined steps toward establishment in a house of her own. Elaborate plans for a dinner party with the theme, ?farewell to the Esplanade Street house? are set into motion. She is a woman of action, one without regard to consequences. However, for all that is keeping her busy, it is not firm enough to ward off that old disappointment. Of Alcee, she thinks, ?There was the dull pang of regret because it was not the kiss of love which had enflamed her, because it was not love which had held this cup of life to her lips.? (1077) Even in the midst of the party itself, as she reigns at the head of the table like a gold-sheathed goddess, the wave is stirred. It gains in strength and pours forth until it strikes her in a freezing cascade. It seems, the independence she has taken for herself does not make her capable of retrieving the one thing she wants, but has yet to possess.

Maria?s Self-Discovery

Maria did not have as much self-discovery to do compared to Edna. The reason for that is, Maria was put in the institution because she was starting to protest her status as property from the start. Maria from the beginning knew were she stood but did not know how to do so freely. As her love for Darnford grew, her feelings of independence did as well. Maria fought her hardest to see that her injustice be terminated. Instead of taking the easy way out like Edna did, Maria fought her hardest for both her and Darnford. Her baby was still on her mind as were those of Edna but her self-discovery was that she could love another man without being oppressed. She also realized that she did not have to marry Darnford in order to be his wife, ?Marriage, as at present?of women in society.? (128) Contrary to Edna, Maria sees a future for her and Darnford without any turmoil, Edna only sees things getting worse and is pessimistic about the relationship, believing that she will never be satisfied.

Edna?s Conclusion

Edna does love Robert. She feels for him what a girl from the plains of Mississippi had expected to feel for her husband. However, she has grown enough as a character to be able to objectively analyze herself and come to the wrenching conclusion that she will never be satisfied. The constant thought of her children and how she was a bad mother will ring inside her head forever. Eventually, another man would replace Robert, and another after him. As a fundamentally caring person, it would have been difficult to continue to hurt others as her self-respect eroded. Waves have beat against the shores of this earth since the beginning of time, so would Edna be plagued by frustrations that may well have driven her mad. As much as her heart strains with the essence of her love for Robert, she loves herself more. This is why a suicide is the only suitable manner in which to end this novel. If Edna were to be no more, then the wave would strike no more. It would simply crest and blend with the rush of foam to wash over the sandy shore and be tugged back into the immense ?abysses of solitude.? (1022)

Maria?s Conclusion

Maria loves Darnford; she seems in him what she has always longed for in a man. Since there is no real ending to the novel, we are unaware of what happens to Maria and Darnford. The last we know is that Maria gives a flawless speech defending her and Darnford?s actions that in any case should have won. Maria?s love for Darnford and herself are very apparent in her closing speech. There is no evidence as to what she or Darnford are thinking, although that leaves us to imagine. There are many plausible endings unlike Edna?s.

In conclusion, it is evident that the two stories have a similar plot and both discuss the oppression of women in the institution of marriage. The two characters, Edna and Maria, both challenge the oppressive ideology by finding new love and they dealt with the obstacles a long the way.