Escape through Madness and Suicide in Fiction by Charlotte
Perkins Gilman, Kate Chopin, and Edith Wharton

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Thesis Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements of the Degree of Masters of Arts in English Literature and Criticism at Yarmouk University

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Charlotte Perkins Gilman, Kate Chopin, and Edith
Wharton

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2012
Dedication

Cordially dedicated to my loving father who
Has always showed his unwavering faith in my
abilities,
To my mother,
To my dear husband,
To all my family
And
My friends.
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To my entire family I owe the greatest debt.
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Abstract

Escape through Madness and Suicide in Fiction by Charlotte Perkins Gilman, Kate Chopin, and Edith Wharton

By:
Malék Ben Lahcene

This thesis discusses how escape from patriarchy can be achieved through madness and suicide in Charlotte Perkins Gillman's "The Yellow Wallpaper" and "Making a Change", Kate Chopin's The Awakening, and Edith Wharton's The House of Mirth. It utilizes feminist arguments in examining the female protagonists who change from being submissive women to rebellious ones through their unconventional aggressive behaviors. This study examines the emerging unconventional behavior of the female protagonist vis-à-vis the social and cultural changes leading to the emergence of what is known as the "New Woman". Furthermore, it sheds light on the perspective of these female writers who depict the protagonists' madness and suicide. This depiction leads to confirm the idea of the social suffocating milieu that spurred these female writers to provide their female protagonists with such an end.

Key Words: madness, suicide, escape, oppression, domesticity, patriarchy, "New womanhood", "cult of Domesticity", and turn of the century.
Introduction

The late nineteenth and early twentieth century can be said to be a turning point not only in human history, but also in literature. Many writers, within this era, expressed their disgust and disillusionment with their surrounding which was characterized by much oppression, violence, and materialism. Parallel to this state, individuals in general, and writers, in particular, became more and more conscious and sensitive towards their society, and started to prospect the thorny issue of the handling as well as the perception of the conventional codes and values within societies. Many literary works took the onus of exploring this issue or at least highlighting it taking into consideration the disastrous outcomes of any possible disparity, neglect, or disregard of social norms and conventional conducts.

As such, voices of criticism and disobedience grew louder desiring change. Unfortunately, many of these writers who expressed their rejection or discomfort with their entourage became outsiders (Wilson 23). Thus, they turned towards themselves and used imagery of enclosure exploring images of frustration, prisons, and cages forging a literature, more or less, of escape – a literature that prompts escape from the social boundaries (Gilbert and Gubar 86). This state of affairs was not only related to male writers but also to female writers, especially those who desired to shift
from the traditional Victorian domesticity towards a more modern way of life. These female writers, at the turn of the twentieth century, started to exteriorize their interests, concerns, and growing awareness as well as rejection of their status within the patriarchal dominated societies. According to Paul Robert Lamb and G.R. Tompson, the various conditions ranging from the Civil War, the increasing urbanization, the immigration and the industrialization changed women's lives and perceptions in terms of cultural and conventional expectations. Women, due to their growing cognisance, began to question their position within the public sphere, their rights of education, owning property, and their status within marriage. In fact, women did not stop at the level of questioning, but moved to expressing these interests through writing (260). Just like male writers, female writers, too, faced the same social rejection, if not more, simply because they were females; consequently, they turned to depict their imprisonment, not only as distinguished individuals within society, but mainly as women misjudged and mistreated starting from their own houses. In fact, the "distinction between male and female images of imprisonment is- and always has been- a distinction between, on the one hand, that which is both metaphysical and metaphorical, and on the other hand, that which is social and actual"(Gilbert and Gubar 86). In other words, though male and female writers suffered from the same general historical conditions, women were more segregated due to their gender.
Accordingly, a desire to develop a literature of their own emerged among some women. This feminist literature portrays, in general, female characters who seem to be in constant conflicts with conventional and traditional patriarchal society owing to their quest for self-agency. Due to the depiction of nonconventional rebellious female characters, most of this feminist fiction, especially at earlier phases, has been criticized and ridiculed. The primary objective of feminist fiction is to objectify the voices of the previously silenced women as well as to remodel their status within society encompassing the public sphere, the workplace, the home, the cultural realm, etc.

In fact, women started writing and publishing as early as the seventeenth century with Aphra Behn's (1640-1689) *Oroonoko: Or, The History of the Royal Slave* (1688), Mary de la Rivière Manley's (c. 1670-1724) *The Secret History of Queen Zarah and the Zarazians* (1705). Later on, the nineteenth century became the golden age for female writers including Jane Austen (1775-1817), Mary Wollstonecraft Shelley (1797-1851), Charlotte Brontë (1816-1855), and Emily Brontë (1818-1848) whose fiction included romantic elements, Gothic features, psychologically complex characters, and most importantly social criticism about women's dependence and passivity.
The end of the nineteenth century and the beginning of the twentieth century emerged to be a watershed in female writing history. This period was characterized by a growing sensibility, and most importantly by a conspicuous dissatisfaction about women's status within the domestic and public sphere. Thus, most female writings attacked concepts such as the "Cult of Domesticity" and "True Womanhood" and, at the same time promoted what is called "the New Woman". These female writers discovered a number of disparities between their own ambitions, ingenuity, and creativity on one hand and the limited, often secondary, roles assumed by the majority of traditional female fictional characters on the other hand. This reality was easily explained, as the majority of novelists were white men. By the mid-twentieth century, a plethora of long fiction by women began to appear, with realistic female characters. Women's fiction transformed from products of imitation of a male aesthetic to protests against that aesthetic, eventually becoming self-defining works of literature. (Brackett 4)

Women's writings, at the turn of the century, are so revolutionary and unconventional via their untraditional and unruly female characters who often go mad or commit suicide in order not to live or adhere to the patriarchal regulations. Among these female writers are Kate Chopin (1851-1904), Virginia Woolf (1882-1941), Rebecca West (1892-1983), Charlotte Perkins Gilman (1860 –1935), Edith Wharton (1862 –1937), and so many others. In describing the female writers' fiction of this period
raging from 1860 to 1920, often called the first wave feminism, Elizabeth Ammons maintains that

The turn-of-the-century women writers found themselves, often in deep, subtle ways, emotionally stranded between two worlds. They floated between a past they wished to leave (sometimes ambivalently, sometimes defiantly) and a future that they had not yet gained. They were full members neither of their mothers' world, at the one extreme, nor of that of the privileged white male artist, at the other. Further, the ways of living and types of writing associated with "art" had by and large been shaped by men; they were not necessarily compatible with the kinds of lives and types of stories that women writers wished to express. Tension between the tradition they aspired to enter and the lives and fictions they sought to create as women was inevitable. (11)

In fact, Ammons' description of women of the turn of the century explains much about their fiction. The latter was generally not heroic in the proper sense of the term; female characters try to contradict or reject their phallocentric societies, but could never reach an absolute victory or freedom. Thus, many of these female characters go mad or commit suicide in an attempt to escape the confines of their patriarchal societies.

Culturally speaking, women during the Victorian period and even later on had to fit some primordial standards in order to be "Ideal women", "Perfect Ladies", "Angels of the their Houses" and most importantly to be submissive to society in general and to men in particular (Showalter 14). On the other hand, a new image of a different kind of women called the
"New Woman" started to emerge. This "New woman" becomes the aspiration of modern women in general, and the ones of the nineteenth century in particular. She by no means resembles the woman created by "the cult of domesticity". She is an outstanding, independent, and ambitious woman who turns towards herself rejecting the masculine power rather than toil to satisfy and fulfill her role as wife and mother. In order to have a better apprehension of the concept of the "new woman", it is necessary to understand the vision of the perfect woman who should be feminine and consequently weak, passive, and dependent as opposite to the masculine entailing strength, aggressiveness, and independence and which are superior terms since they describe the members of society who have power (Perguson 20).

It all started, according to Carrol Smith-Rosenberg, with male doctors during the 1860s and 1870s who “began systematically to transpose the Cult of True Womanhood into a medical and scientific dogma... Gender distinctions were rooted in biology, and so, therefore, was the patriarchal world order” (23). As such, any attempt by women to break out of the defined roles was rejected, forbidden, and necessitated treatment. However, no longer adhering and accepting what is labeled the "True womanhood" entailing domesticity, chastity, and obedience, a new generation of women that emerged mainly during the nineteenth century called for the exigency to pervade the public world (Ammons 7).