



The Wakening

Critical Analysis in Literature Comparing Heroines

Re-read Gilmore's *The Yellow Wallpaper*. Then, read the essay excerpt below which critically compares Dreiser's Carrie and Chopin's Edna. Note how the essay is structured and developed. Next, select either Carrie or Edna and, using the heroine in *Yellow Wall Paper*, write your own critical comparison analysis of your selected pair [i.e. Edna and Yellow or Carrie and Yellow.] Be sure to plan logically, present your facts clearly, and write in a mature style.

From: *Kate Chopin and the American Realists*
by
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Kate Chopin and Theodore Dreiser have in common a directness and a complete honesty in their descriptions of Edna's and Carrie's violations of what both writers considered society's "arbitrary scale" of morals...

We have here two authors each writing about a heroine pursuing a chimera; the magnet drawing Carrie is the golden radiance on the distant hilltops, and the illusion firing Edna is the idea that she can achieve the ecstasy of an all-encompassing love. Both writers see their protagonists as wisps in the wind among the forces that move us, but with a difference...

Dreiser, reflecting a mostly socio-economic determinism, endows Carrie with less free will than that found in Edna. What freedom Carrie has she uses to act out the changing roles which she copies from those one step ahead of her. True, she achieves outer independence, but she is unthinkable without the society which provides her with models. As symbolized by the rocking chair, she has scarcely moved at the end of the novel; she is basically unchanged, ever looking to the next hill, her eyes still largely unopened to the real emptiness of her longings.

Edna, meanwhile, is awakened to a spiritual independence in general and to a realization of the nature of reality in particular. Of these two solitary souls, the outwardly successful Carrie gains little more than the finery without which she, like her first lover, is merely "nothing," when the apparently defeated Edna takes off her clothes, on the other hand, it symbolizes a victory of self-knowledge and authenticity as she fully becomes herself.

Carrie's blind, irresistible fight to get ahead has an unquestionable universality, and there is a similar quality in Edna's open-eyed choice to defy illusions and conventions. Different as these two novels are in form and theme – one terse in its concentration on inner reality, the other full of details on the outer show – both give a sense of tragic life, conveying something of the human condition.