American Individualism and Female Autonomy in American Women's Writing

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Esra ÇÖKER

Dokuz Eylul University
esra.coker@deu.edu.tr
https://orcid.org/0000-0002-4983-6496

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Tel: 0 216 428 06 54 // 0530 076 94 90

mail: destek@artikelakademi.com
www.artikelakademi.com

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For my beloved father
whom I lost to cancer in 2023,
whose absence I carry every day.
This book is dedicated to his memory.

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Preface

This book is the outcome of long-standing reflections that took shape through teaching three of my favorite courses: *American Ideas and Values, Feminist Theory*, and *The American Short Story*. Though distinct in focus, these courses gradually converged on a persistent question: What does it mean for American women to be part of America's self-understanding in light of American individualism? In *American Ideas and Values*, what continually drew my attention was how individualism stood out among other national ideals, not only as a foundational value but as one that has increasingly defined the American ethos across generations. In *Feminist Theory*, I was struck by how little space this ideal allowed for women. It became clear that the myth of individualism, so central to American identity, was rarely constructed with women in mind. Finally, in *The American Short Story*, the literary texts offered a historical perspective that revealed the enduring nature of this paradox. Across time, despite changes in social conditions, the central tension remained: women were expected to embody an ideal of autonomy that was never fully designed for them. Each of the women in these stories—consciously or not—fought her own battle and searched for solutions in spaces that were never fully theirs. In the spirit of an old saying, they "made a way out of no way."

The question of how women relate to individualism was never simply theoretical—it played out vividly in classroom discussions. Our readings of short stories featuring female protagonists repeatedly returned us to the same concerns: Could these women breathe freely? Were they able to realize their wants, desires, and needs? If so, through what strategies or paths? Were their choices deliberate, or did they intuitively carve out space for themselves? Did they truly understand the meaning of freedom? And ultimately, how valid, or attainable, was the American ideal of individualism for them as women?

It was in pursuit of answers to these questions that I began writing this book. There were many stories I might have included in this book, but I ultimately made a deliberate choice to focus on six — just a few, but telling. Each illuminates one of three key modes by which female characters respond to and reimagine autonomy within the American framework. Fiction, after all, offers a window into the cultural and social fabric of any given era. I especially hope that male readers will understand how the self-reliant American individualist, the new "American Adam," as described by R.W.B. Lewis, was never an available archetype for American women in any particular period.

Seen together, these six stories, which span different historical moments from the 19th to the 21st century, reveal that the issue of women's autonomy, even in a nation committed to liberty and self-actualization, remains unresolved. The settings change, the voices vary, but the central paradox endures. Women's autonomy, it seems, continues to wait its turn—patiently, stubbornly, absurdly—as if history hasn't had more than enough time to figure it out. Centuries apart—yet still, the same story.

This book would not have come into being without the inspiration and support of many people. My deepest gratitude goes to my students, whose curiosity and openness have been instrumental in shaping my thoughts and perspectives. I am especially thankful to my dear colleagues Yeşim Başarır, Evrim Ersöz Erkoç, and Asila Ertekin for their generous intellectual companionship and invaluable feedback, and to Abdullah Derin for his technical support and assistance, which proved essential in the final stages of this work.

To my sons, Atakan and Efekan—your unwavering encouragement and emotional strength have been both inspiring and sustaining. And a very special thanks to Oğuz Uzol, whose unique artistic vision, created in collaboration with AI, gave life to a cover that speaks volumes before a single word is read. Your contribution is truly priceless.

INTRODUCTION

Individualism in the United States functions as an institutionalized value deeply embedded within and perpetuated by the state's apparatus and its socio-cultural legacy, and has often been equated in the American popular imagination with financial independence or self-reliance. It has even been named by some as America's "secular religion" (Mount 362), shaping the mindset and lifestyle of millions of Americans. As such, it comes as little surprise that the United States consistently ranks as the most individualistic country in the world,[1] rendering the terms "American" and "individualism" nearly synonymous in the eyes of many. Since its inception, the term has also been deeply intertwined with America's foundational principles—life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness. All three "unalienable rights," irrespective of class, race, or gender, highlight the importance of the inherent value and autonomy of the individual, enabling each individual to be free from tyranny and oppression to pursue their own paths to fulfillment. The principles in the *Declaration of Independence* have, throughout the centuries, fostered a highly individualistic culture that is uniquely its own, setting it apart from other countries in its strong emphasis on personal freedom and material success.

From the 18th century onwards, American individualism has been associated not only with self-sufficiency and the self-determination necessary to fight the obstacles of society, tradition, dogma, and rule, but also with an inner calling capable of guiding the individual in his path of right and wrong. While the confidence and resilience asserted through personal stamina have driven the American individual to break free from the constraints of a "collective will" and assume full responsibility, the moral dimension, the inner "calling" has endowed

1 The United States can clearly be seen as the most individualistic country in the world scoring a 91 out of 100 on Hofstede's individualism scale. See https://geerthofstede.com/

him with a strong sense of duty and justice, encouraging him to act according to what he inherently believes is right. The pioneer, the cowboy, and Marvel's Captain America each represent distinct facets of the American individualistic spirit. Pioneers, through their encounters and conflicts with Native Americans, are celebrated as heroes opening new frontiers and opportunities to white settlers; with their sacred plow, they embody the industry and effort to expand, tame, and colonize. Cowboys, with their rugged individualism and personal codes, symbolize self-reliance and resilience, overcoming the challenges of the frontier with mastery, violence, and fierce independence. Even Marvel comic heroes, like Captain America, embody a strong sense of moral duty, taking action based on their inherent sense of right and wrong, often standing against overwhelming odds to uphold justice.

These emblematic figures—the adventurous pioneer, the rugged cowboy, and Marvel's most righteous superhero, Captain America—all reflect an individualistic ideal deeply rooted in self-reliance, resilience, and moral conviction. Nevertheless, while this vision of American individualism encourages everyone to strive for economic independence and moral autonomy, the way this ideal is experienced and internalized differs for men and women. Social expectations and gender roles have long positioned women within relationships and communal roles, shaping their sense of self in ways that suppress their individuality and creativity. Rather than being encouraged to cultivate personal autonomy, women have historically been socialized to prioritize relational identities—such as those of mothers, wives, or daughters—thereby restricting their capacity for individual self-actualization and agency. In other words, the American Dream and American individualism, two narratives that have long shaped the cultural and social fabric of the United States, have unfortunately not served women and have often been somewhat deceptive.

Thus, for many American women, the ideal of self-reliance—so deeply embedded in the national ethos—is offered in theory but withheld in practice. It comes with conditions: available only through roles that reinforce subordination or mask dependence as strength. Thus, while American individualism promises autonomy, it also operates through exclusions that leave women caught between visibility and erasure, agency and confinement. This double bind fosters a dual alienation: not only are women estranged from the public language of autonomy, but also from their own ways of being, which often value care, connection, and

mutual growth. Women's individual endeavors are often less about climbing the ladder of success or accumulating material wealth and more about fostering meaningful connections and contributing to the well-being of others. Yet, in a society that exalts self-sufficiency and individual achievement as markers of strength, this relational approach has often been misunderstood and seen as a weakness.

Nevertheless, women still strive for autonomy not as men do, in isolation or competition, but by creating spaces where they can be true to themselves, even within the confines of societal expectations. In this light, women's ways of being and knowing offer not a lesser form of individualism but a deeply humane and interconnected vision of what it means to thrive, albeit for some it leads to confinement, madness, even death. Their individualism, thus, becomes a quiet rebellion—a steadfast commitment to listen to their inner calling of what is right and wrong—and a reimagining of autonomy that honors both their relationships and their personal truths.

As such, in order to fully understand the influence of American individualism in women's lived reality, it is essential to consider its twofold nature: the material and the moral. These are not abstract categories, but concrete forces that have shaped how women's autonomy and American individual ethos have evolved over time. Material/economic individualism, the locomotive of the American Dream, frequently overshadows its moral counterpart in cultural discourse, often sidelining the introspective roles of conscience and intuition. The deeper moral aspect of autonomy is especially relevant for female agency, for it associates self-determination not only with the capacity to shape one's desires and goals but also with the commitment to act in accordance with one's values, convictions, and sense of inner integrity. This broader, more inclusive understanding of individualism acknowledges that genuine autonomy does not solely reside in independence from others, but also in the freedom to define oneself in harmony with one's values and relationships.

Consequently, if individualism involves not just financial or social independence but the ability to define one's moral law—a law that affirms the intrinsic worth of one's inner desires—then achieving true autonomy for women requires a reimagining of self-governance. Such a vision necessitates the creation of alternative frameworks for autonomy that can set moral resistance against norms that invalidate female self-worth and dignity. The desire for

autonomy empowers them, but at the same time, it can lead to isolation or social exclusion when it exceeds socially accepted boundaries. As such, American women writers view the interplay between autonomy and individualism not as strictly involving financial independence, but as the ability to, in Butler's words, "devis[e] solutions of diverse values in the ethical scale" (77).

The body of literature selected for this study includes American women writers who compel their female protagonists to engage in reflective deliberation, urging them to reevaluate their available choices and exercise self-governance, even when these choices are suppressed by oppressive conditions that have long suppressed their capacity for autonomy and creativity. They depict heroines trying to create freedom within the constraints of freedom itself, either through taking advantage of the limited options available to them or, in surprising ways, by embracing unconventional paths to assert their agency. Such responses may take the form of bold but self-destructive acts, where the heroine is willing to destroy the encapsulated female self to achieve liberation or defiance. This could be achieved through retreating into one's inner world—a form of psychological emancipation, as seen in Charlotte Perkins Gilman's "The Yellow Wallpaper" (1899); or seeking freedom in oblivion—a form of existential surrender, as in Kate Chopin's *The Awakening* (1899).

Another path, more subtle yet equally powerful, involves creating comfort zones aligned with personal aspirations and self-definitions—spaces where a heroine can exercise a degree of autonomy within the confines of societal norms. Mary E. Wilkins Freeman's "A New England Nun" (1891) and Ann Beattie's "Janus" (1985) are examples of this quiet form of resistance. In both works, the spaces of comfort—domestic or professional—are artistically and deliberately shaped, whether from "little feminine appurtenances" ("A New England Nun") or symbolic objects of success ("Janus"), and serve as sanctuaries where a sense of control, stability, and selfhood can quietly take root. These women do not merely inhabit these spaces; they co-create them through their deep, almost fixated connection to seemingly ordinary objects.

A third and more transformative response involves creating visionary spaces—neither confined nor self-destructive, but radically reimagined. In Octavia Butler's *Parable of the Sower* (1993), female agency is interwoven with a collective vision for survival and evolution. In Ellen Gilchrist's "Revenge", autonomy is reclaimed through a young girl's unwavering belief in her limitless

potential—her ability to move mountains with the fearless joy, stubborn will, and untamed spirit of a child. For some, this reimagining takes place in speculative futures where constraint no longer dictates possibility; for others, it unfolds within the familiar landscape of Issaquena County, Mississippi, where even the ordinary becomes a site of self-determination. Whether set in a dystopian world or a quiet Southern town, both narratives reflect the same urgency: when the real world offers no room for freedom, women will invent new ones.

Ultimately, women's individualism in these texts is not shaped by institutional structures or societal expectations but instead emerges from women's inner conviction and personal resilience. Whether the result is affirmative or disruptive, the inner calling to listen to one's own voice and act accordingly has often led women writers to create personal spaces of freedom – physical or psychological - for their female characters. Moral agency is not about rejecting or affirming societal expectations but a negotiation—a search for ways to assert individuality while remaining grounded in personal truths. This approach reflects a more intricate understanding of right and wrong, one that is deeply intertwined with both the aspirations for transcendence and the limitations of immanence, seeking alternative paths to fulfillment and self-assertion.

Consequently, this book argues that American women's writings are built upon the need to find agency within limitation, to reimagine women's autonomy and offer alternative frameworks—one that allows women to achieve self-governance in ways that authentically reflect their intrinsic values and desires while charting a path across the complex terrain of identity, relationships, and societal expectations so as not to be silenced or cast away. In these writings, the ideal of individualism, rather than being an atomistic individual's quest for self-actualization, becomes a dilemma they must respond to, a challenge they must confront, in order to create spaces of freedom, autonomy, and self-respect. Moreover, the struggle for agency is full of contradictions, not the neatly packaged liberal individualistic ideal of the self-made man or unmade man. Their writings reveal that the pursuit of autonomy can sometimes manifest in ways that are subversive and deeply challenging to a woman's sense of identity and inner equilibrium. Either way, women's responses should not be dismissed as failures or lesser forms of agency, but rather seen as re-imaginings of what it means to live freely—not in spite of being women, but precisely through it.

1

AMERICAN INDIVIDUALISM: A DOUBLE-EDGED SWORD

The word "individualism" entered the American lexicon in 1840 with one of the greatest works of nineteenth-century political writing, Alexis de Tocqueville's *Democracy in America*. Tocqueville described individualism as a deliberate withdrawal from the public sphere into the comforts of private life, where personal satisfaction superseded collective responsibility. He warned that such tendencies could lead to the erosion of civic virtue, writing, " Individualism is a mature and calm feeling which disposes each member of the community to sever himself from the mass of his fellow-creatures; and to draw apart with his family and his friends; so that after he thus formed a little circle of his own, he willingly leaves society at large to itself" (618). Tocqueville critically examined the dimensions of isolation, privacy, and withdrawal embedded within individualism, asserting that its effects would ultimately "confine" individuals "entirely within the solitude of [their] own heart" (620). This observation has inspired a significant body of scholarship to analyze the aspects of "withdrawal," "self-centeredness" and "privacy" inherent in American individualism and their profound implications for societal cohesion and communal life.[2] Christopher Lasch, in *The Culture of Narcissism* (1979), explored the psychological and social implications of withdrawal and privacy within American society, characterizing the contemporary condition in the United States as marked by an "oscillation of self-esteem" reaching the levels

[2] The scholarship provided by Lasch, Slater, Rieff, and Bellah et al draw a comprehensive analysis of how the condition of withdrawal and privacy within the American individual intersect with broader societal structures and individual behaviors, shedding light on the underlying dynamics of contemporary American individualism. For further reading see Lasch, Rieff, Slater and Bellah et al.

of "pathological narcissism" (177). Similarly, Philip Rieff, in *The Triumph of the Therapeutic* (1966) observes that the modern individual "builds his tight family island," (53) retreating into privatized spaces as broader communal ties erode. Slater's evocative critiques, in The *Pursuit of Loneliness* (1970), such as his depiction of life as an "orderly chrome and porcelain vacuum" (16), further underscore the social and psychological dimensions of American individualism. Robert Bellah's *Habits of the Heart* (1985), contributes to this discourse by describing the modern individual as a "socially unsituated self" (55), one who perceives moral authority as emanating solely from within, feeling no accountability to anyone beyond the self. The scholarship of Lasch, Slater, Rieff, and Bellah et al. illuminate the underlying dynamics of withdrawal and privacy in contemporary American individualism, highlighting their adverse effects on broader societal structures and personal interactions. Yet, despite its potential negative connotations, individualism has evolved into a normative ideal in American culture, celebrated and upheld by the majority with minimal scrutiny, effectively functioning as a cornerstone of the nation's identity and value system.

In Pursuit of the Self: The Early Ideals Behind American Individualism

The historical roots of American individualism can be traced back to the early 18th century, even before the American Republic was founded. Its influences are clearly seen in the Puritan community, which gave great importance to "personal godliness" (Block 41), hard work, and moral rectitude, where each individual was held accountable not only to society but also to their own conscience. From the 18th century onwards, Puritan sermons, grounded on a secular-sacred typology –the gospel of wealth-, aligned godliness and moral duty with prosperity and the acquisition of wealth. Such a view reflected a radical shift in the traditional Christian view of moral virtue:

> In the long run, it is only to the man of morality that wealth comes. Put two men in adjoining fields, one man strong and normal, the other weak and listless. One picks up his spade, turns over the earth, and works till sunset. The other turns

> over a few clods, gets a drink from the spring, takes a nap, and loafs back to his work. In a few years, one will be rich for his needs, and the other a pauper dependent on the first, and growling at his prosperity. . . . Godliness is in league with riches. (Lawrence 289). [3]

Because wealth and property were read as signs of a man's possession of worldly virtues, sermons began advocating Christians to "[g]et rich, if you can. Moreover, when you shall have amassed wealth, it will be God's power, if you are wise to use it, by which you can make your home happier, the community more refined, and the whole land more civilized." (Beecher 240). Not surprisingly, some sermons even associated 'chosenness' with Americans being "conducted into a good land, flowing with milk and honey; that they might there possess property, enjoy the blessing of equal laws, and be happy" (Mayhew 293).[4] Similarly, during the Great Awakening, preachers such as Jonathan Edwards and George Whitefield employed powerful, emotive sermons distinctive to their own character and theological perspective to encourage personal repentance and sincere conversion. By leveraging their individual strengths, these preachers contributed to the greater good of the community and mesmerized a large public, emphasizing moral exhortation as a crucial element of this period. This fusion of spiritual virtue and economic success established a framework where wealth became not only a marker of divine favor but also a moral obligation, intertwining the sacred and the profane in the pursuit of individual achievement.

Puritan conversion narratives also reflect an early manifestation of the individualistic ethos, wherein personal salvation and spiritual authenticity were paramount, and individuals sought to demonstrate their personal connection with the divine through self-examination and introspection. These narratives were personal testimonies of faith marked by a rigorous practice of conscience-driven self-examination. Candidates were required to convince their audience of "saints" that their spiritual experiences over the years were genuine and transformative, ultimately leading them to a state of spiritual enlightenment and divine grace. With their introspective focus on self-scrutiny and moral self-assessment, with their heavy reliance on rhetoric and performance skills,

3 Can be accessed online http://academic.brooklyn.cuny.edu/history/dfg/amrl/lawrence.htm
4 Can be accessed online https://archive.org/details/wallgardenselect1968plum/page/192/mode/2up

conversion narratives are highly unique and individualistic in their attempt to construct and maintain the Puritan "imaginary."[5]

The Puritan belief in worldly achievement and self-scrutiny as the two pillars of personal salvation would later lay the groundwork for what would be recognized as a distinct cultural model, where economic self-sufficiency and moral introspection became like Siamese twins, bound together at the heart of American individualism.

The Moral and Material Dimensions od American Individualism

To understand American individualism in its full scope, it is essential to examine it from two perspectives — the material/economic and the moral. These two dimensions are not merely theoretical constructs; they are practical realities that influence how individuals govern their lives and how American society as a whole evolves. The economic aspect of individualism is the more visible and frequently encountered one in public discourse and American history, making it the one more widely acknowledged. It is closely associated with the American frontier spirit, with Frederick Jackson Turner's "pioneer" hero who brings with him the "the ideal of personal development, free from social and governmental constraint" and is ready "to seize the opportunity" as "the prizes were for the keenest and the strongest" (228). It is the kind of individualism that leads people to view their fate as entirely within their own hands, "ow[ing] nothing to any man; they acquire the habit of always considering themselves as standing alone, and they are apt to imagine that their whole destiny is in their own hands" (Tocqueville 622). This material dimension of individualism also finds a vivid expression in Emerson's work. As Teichgraeber notes (3-43), Emerson, while

5 These conversion narratives constructed and maintained the Puritan "imaginary" according to the elective standard in question, or what the early American historian Edmund Sears Morgan, in his book *Visible Saints: The History of A Puritan Idea* (1963) describes as the "morphology of conversion" (66). Candidates who best assured their spiritual transformation to be including the stages of "knowledge, conviction, faith, combat, and true, imperfect assurance" (72) were able to enter the congregation of the elect. As Morgan states, "True, only God ultimately knew men's hearts, but it seemed not impossible to discern from a man's account of himself, whether his assurance was true or false, whether he had passed through conviction to faith or had merely rested in a 'legal' knowledge of good and evil" (72-73).

committed to individuality and critical of institutions and conformity, believed that the market could play a crucial role in self-culture, provided it was seen as a means to a higher moral and personal end. In 'Wealth,' the third essay of his *The Conduct of Life*, Emerson boldly voices his support for a laissez-faire market economy, advocating that its 'free' and 'just' incentives will reward only those with good character, reinforcing the notion that moral virtue and economic success are inherently linked:

> Wealth brings with it its checks and balances. The basis of political economy is non-interference. Open the doors of opportunity to talent and virtue, and they will do themselves justice, and property will not be in bad hands. In a free and just commonwealth, property rushes from the idle and imbecile to the industrious, brave, and persevering. ("Wealth" 70)

By deeming social mobility and wealth appropriate only to individuals who are "industrious, brave, and persevering," Emerson, in a way, suggests that wealth naturally regulates itself by shifting to those who deserve it. Thus, in the wake of Emerson, economic individualism becomes not just a personal ideal but a national ethos, suggesting that anyone can achieve success through hard work and determination. This is not surprising, given that the roots of material individualism extend much deeper, with traces visible in the Protestant work ethic, which views success, wealth, and personal achievement not only as a measure of individual worth but also as a reflection of one's moral standing. By doing so, it reflected values such as self-discipline, hard work, determination, and resilience as innate characteristics of morally virtuous individuals and, by extension, as defining attributes of American individualism itself. As social philosopher Yehoshua Arieli aptly points out, it becomes an inseparable part of the American Creed[6], providing the "nation with a rationalization of its

6 It is the British writer Gilbert Keith Chesterton who first uses the term "American Creed" in his travelogue written in 1921 to describe the essence of the national and social uniformity he observed in the United States: "America is the only nation in the world that is founded on a creed. That creed is set forth with dogmatic and even theological lucidity in the Declaration of Independence. . . ." (7). Nevertheless, it was Seymour Martin Lipset's usage of the term in his work *American Exceptionalism: A Double-Edged Sword* that the concept gained renewed relevance and attracted significant critical attention in the socıo-political realm. Building on the work of Yehoshua Arieli, Lipset offered fresh insights into the unique and distinctive character of the United States. In his work American Exceptionalism: A Double-Edged Sword, Lipset describes the United States as "qualitatively different" from other nations due to it being founded on a set of values that he summarizes as the "American Creed." He identifies the five core tenets of this creed as "liberty, egalitarianism, individualism, populism, and laissez-faire" (19). For further reading see Lipset.

characteristic attitudes, behavior patterns, and aspirations. It endows the past, the present, and the future with a unified perspective and a sense of progress. It explains the peculiar social and political organization of the nation—unity despite heterogeneity—and it points towards an ideal of social organization in harmony with American experience" (345-46).

Economic individualism gains tremendous momentum during the post-war era, as economic growth and the promise of upward mobility painted a vision of universal opportunity. This material dimension of individualism—giving primacy to self-interest and individual ends in terms of monetary success and achievement—is felt heavily even in present-day America. Jeremy Rifkin, a prominent American economic and social theorist of present day, in his book *The European Dream: How Europe's Vision of the Future is Quietly Eclipsing the American Dream* (2004), articulates how personal autonomy and financial prosperity are like Siamese twins in the American imagination—each playing an equally vital role in the shaping of the national ethos; inseparable and mutually reinforcing:

> For us, freedom has long been associated with autonomy. If one is autonomous, he or she is not dependent on others or vulnerable to circumstances outside of his or her control. To be autonomous, one needs to be propertied. The more wealth one amasses, the more independent one is in the world. One is free by becoming self-reliant and an island unto oneself. With wealth comes exclusivity, and with exclusivity comes security. (13)

The material dimension of individualism is deeply embedded in the American Dream, symbolized by a suburban lifestyle, owning a home, a car, and enjoying a Sunday barbecue with your kids in your backyard garden. This vision has long driven the aspirations of millions, from early settlers to modern-day immigrants, all seeking to carve out a better life through hard work and perseverance. Jeffrey Kluger, an editor at large at *Time Magazine*, eloquently articulates how this ardent pursuit of the American Dream is less about contentment and more about chasing the ever-elusive "Next Big Thing," reflecting the nation's ingrained desire for progress and self-determination:

> All human beings may come equipped with the pursuit-of-happiness impulse--the urge to find lusher land just over

> the hill, fatter buffalo in the next valley--but it's Americans who have codified the idea, written it into the Declaration of Independence and made it a central mandate of the national character. American happiness would never be about savor-the-moment contentment. That way lay the reflective café culture of the Old World--fine for Europe, not for Jamestown. Our happiness would be bred, instead, of an almost adolescent restlessness, an itch to do the Next Big Thing. The terms of the deal the founders offered are not easy: there's no guarantee that we'll actually achieve happiness, but we can go after it in almost any way we choose. All by itself, that freedom ought to bring us joy, but the more cramped, distracted, maddeningly kinetic nature of the modern world has made it harder than ever. Somehow there must be a way to thread that needle, to reconcile the contradictions between our pioneer impulses and our contemporary selves. (68)[7]

As Kluger indicates, in present-day America, no matter how hard one works or how vigorously one chases opportunities, attaining the American dream of wealth and success has become more and more unreachable. A study published by the Pew Charitable Trusts in 2012 concludes that "Only 4 percent of those raised in the bottom quintile make it all the way to the top as adults."[8] Another research by Miles Corak entitled "Income Inequality, Equality of Opportunity, and Intergenerational Mobility" (2013) also reinforces PEW's findings. In his article, Miles Corak highlights the fact that while the U.S. still idealizes upward mobility, it has become increasingly difficult for those in the lower income brackets to achieve it, especially as wealth becomes more concentrated at the top.[9] However, the narrative of "pulling oneself up by the

7 Jeffrey Kluger, "The Happiness Pursuit" *TIME* (Summer Double Issue): 2013. p.68.

8 https://www.pewresearch.org/global/2013/05/23/chapter-3-inequality-and-economic-mobility/

9 Corak in his article poignantly demonstrates the growing inequality in the United States, particularly the differences in opportunities for upward mobility between the wealthiest Americans and those in the lower half of the income distribution. According to his research, essentially, children of the top 1% are more likely to inherit wealth and remain at the top, as their families accumulate significant capital that is passed down through generations. He argues that this creates a "dynasty" effect (99), where wealth is concentrated at the top and passed on, while opportunities for upward mobility are much more limited for the rest of society. The author contrasts this dynamic with countries like Sweden and Canada, where even though the top 1% still hold significant wealth, the rest of the population enjoys greater mobility due to more equal

bootstraps" still persists, masking the structural barriers that many Americans face today. Economic inequality, stagnant wages, and shifting global markets reveal that the promise of success is far from guaranteed, even for those who work hard. Rising costs of living and advances in technology, such as automation, make the path to prosperity even more difficult. In this context, the long-standing myth of individualism—rooted in the belief that anyone can achieve success through sheer determination—becomes increasingly untenable. Frederick Douglass, a Black leader born into slavery, addressed this very illusion in his famous lecture, *"The Self-Made Men,"* delivered in 1893. At first glance, Douglass's rhetoric appears to heartily embrace and appropriate the American ideal of the "self-made man." Yet, what is often overlooked is how Douglass simultaneously challenges and dismantles this notion, arguing that no one achieves success in isolation: "There are in the world no such men as self-made men. The term implies an individual independence of the past and present which can never exist . . . It must in truth be said. . . that no possible native force of character, and no depth of wealth and originality, can lift a man into absolute independence of his fellowmen, and no generation of men can be independent of the preceding generation" (420). Douglass's insight is particularly relevant today, as economic barriers and systemic inequalities, as well as structures determined by gender, race, and class, expose the fallacy of self-reliance as a universal path to success. The interconnected nature of human progress, in Douglass's term "the ocean" (420)—where personal achievements should also be tied to the opportunities and struggles of the collective —calls attention to the need for a more equitable distribution of resources and systemic support that ensures no one is left behind.

Yet, despite these obstacles, Americans remain fiercely success-driven and undeterred by the challenges they face. What accounts for the ongoing commitment to achievement in the face of increasingly formidable barriers? Or to put it differently, even when the American Dream has become more and more unattainable for many, one wonders how "succeed[ing] regardless of the economic circumstances in which you [a]re born" or "being free to accomplish almost anything you want with hard work" (Corak 79) continue to hold such

labor markets, stronger family institutions, and public investments in education and healthcare. In the U.S. however, the top fifth of the income distribution, which has also benefited from higher education and family support, continues to strive for even greater wealth, often imagining that their children could cross into the top 1%. For them, the American Dream remains alive, and they are less likely to push for policies that would help those at the bottom rise.

powerful sway over the American national consciousness?

The answer lies in the unique social structure of the United States, in what Martin Lipset Seymour in his work *The First New Nation* indicates as the paradoxical relationship between two predominant values –"equality and achievement"– that has been a "constant element in determining American institutions and behavior" (101). Lipset pinpoints how the values of equality and achievement, foundational to the American Dream, are inherently contradictory in nature, for while equality emphasizes fairness and equal opportunities for all, the reality, as Lipset highlights, is that "the wealth of the nation was never distributed as equally as the political franchise" (102). Thus, the ideal of achievement, while encouraging individual success, inevitably results in disparities due to unequal access to resources and opportunities. As Lipset observes, this imbalance has often fostered a distinct class structure, with the ideal of achievement giving rise to an economic aristocracy rooted in wealth and privilege:

> While everyone was supposed to succeed, obviously certain persons were able to achieve greater success than others. The wealth of the nation was never distributed as equally as the political franchise. The tendency for the ideal of achievement to undermine the fact of equality, and to bring a society with a distinct class character, has been checked by the recurrent victories of the forces of equality in the political order. Much of our political history, as Tocqueville noted, can be interpreted in terms of a struggle between proponents of democratic equality and would-be aristocracies of birth or wealth. (102)

Historically, this fundamental imbalance between equality and achievement in American society is strongly observed in the Gilded Age of the late 19th century, when industrial magnates like Rockefeller and Carnegie amassed enormous fortunes while laborers worked under exploitative conditions. This period epitomized the clash between the ideal of success, represented by the rise of the self-made man, and the reality of inequality, as wealth was concentrated in the hands of a few. This wide economic disparity demonstrated vividly the gap between the democratic ideal of equality and the reality of success-driven stratification.

Nevertheless, the pursuit of wealth—and the freedom that accompanies it—is an indispensable aspect of American individualism, making it both a personal goal and a collective cultural inheritance. If we take Ruth Benedict's description of culture as "personality writ large" (xiii), then economic individualism in the United States is the most influential value-judgment, the 'glue' that binds the people together. It operates as a core, an unspoken rule that shapes and unites collective identity, irrespective of class, race, and gender. Robert Bellah, a leading American sociologist, sheds light on the complexities of economic individualism. Bellah, in his seminal work, *"Habits of the Heart,"* while examining the tension between individualism and communal responsibility, particularly notes that individualism—so central to the American ethos—is paradoxically nurtured within the family and community structures that were often seen as antithetical to personal autonomy:

> [T]he family seemed to reinforce the importance of self-reliance as the cardinal virtue of individuals. The idea we have of ourselves as individuals on our own, who earn everything we get, accept no handouts or gifts, and free ourselves from our families of origin turns out, ironically enough, to be one of the things that holds us together. Like other core elements of our culture, the ideal of a self-reliant individual leaving home is nurtured within our families, passed from parent to child through ties that bind us together in solitude. (62)

Bellah, citing the work of Daniel Calhoun, notes that the shift in child-rearing practices— from prioritizing harmony and stability within the family unit towards fostering the growth of "independent, self-sufficient individuals" (57) — started way back in the 18th century. Describing the period of childhood as being chiefly regarded as the "preparation for the all-important event of leaving home" (57), Robert Bellah also points out the complex relationship between individualism and societal expectations in America, particularly concerning upward mobility and success. He argues that many Americans perceive their achievements as the result of personal effort and merit, viewing the structures of society as supportive rather than obstructive:

> For those oriented primarily to upward mobility, to 'success,' major features of American society appear to be 'the normal outcome of the operation of individual achievement.' In this

> conception, individuals, unfettered by family or other group affiliation, are given the chance to make the best of themselves, and, though equality of opportunity is essential, inequality of result is natural. (148-49)

In this view, while individuals have the opportunity to rise based on their accomplishments, inherent inequalities in outcomes are accepted as a natural part of life. In other words, the material aspect of self-reliance—earning one's way and striving for economic independence—is not only about individual achievement but also about strong character and work ethic.

Thus, the concept of American individualism is more complex than the self-made hero of the frontier or the belief in Emersonian self-reliance and self-autonomy. Seamlessly weaving Protestant-inspired moralism with secular aspirations for wealth and personal success, American individualism represents a unique blend of ideals. The American Dream of prosperity and wealth depends entirely on how strong one's moral character and stamina are, and how determined one is to achieve it. And because the chance to succeed economically is believed to rest solely on personal traits, the individual is 'left' in his 'own making.' When failure to succeed becomes a personal flaw, the 'pursuit of happiness' goes beyond being only a dream or a simple pursuit. It "functions more as a testing ground, a model of manhood by which society measures the individual, and in turn, the individual measures himself" (Coker Korpez 44).

As Robert K. Merton, a well-known American sociologist, points out, in American culture, failure is not an option: ". . . in the dictionary of American culture, . . . , there is no such word as 'fail.' The cultural manifesto is clear: one must not quit, must not cease striving, must not lessen his goals, for 'not failure, but low aim, is crime'" (193). Therefore, in the United States, where success becomes a reflection of one's character and moral integrity, and where failure demonstrates a lack of talent, initiative, or industry, individual achievement becomes more than a practical necessity, it becomes what Sandage has indicated as an obligation: "If a man could fail simply by not succeeding or not striving, then ambition [i]s not an opportunity but an obligation" (2).

When individuals face failure in the U.S., the resulting frustration is often internalized, directed inward rather than outward, at oneself rather than at

the societal system that claims to provide equal opportunity. Structural issues like neglect, poverty, and disenfranchisement are often ignored or minimized. Building on Schneider and Smith's work, Bellah also notes that, since there are no universally accepted standards of behavior to measure status in society, status is often assessed through tangible markers such as income and consumption levels. Thus, even when individuals prioritize personal goals and self-interest over communal responsibilities, this does not necessarily result in "bad conscience" or guilt. Societal norms do not penalize this behavior; rather, they support it, reflecting a broader acceptance that the pursuit of material interests is central for individual freedom and moral value, with adherence to rational methods for achieving goals.[10] All of these have contributed to individualism, particularly economic individualism, to remain a compelling narrative, even in the face of mounting evidence that the path to prosperity is becoming more and more difficult each day. But more importantly, beneath the idealized vision of American individualism lies a subtle reality: many Americans have been sold a narrative that equates material success with moral worth, binding the material and moral dimensions of individualism in an inseparable knot.

The moral dimension of American individualism extends far beyond the virtues of achievement—such as work ethic, industriousness, and perseverance—typically associated with material success. It provides the philosophical foundation for the transcendental individualism celebrated by figures like Emerson and Thoreau. This moral dimension emphasizes personal integrity and self-governance, urging individuals to reject societal conventions and instead rely on their own moral compass to discern right from wrong. It revolves around the belief that the individual's inner voice or personal conscience is the ultimate guide to moral action. Emerson's famous dictum to "trust thyself" or Thoreau's concept of "civil disobedience" captures this sentiment, advocating that one's own sense of right and wrong should take precedence over external societal or moral dictates. This moral dimension is more about Emerson's 'self-culture' ideal, "to listening to one's own principles for peace" (Self-Reliance 62), through which individuals strive to cultivate their intellectual, moral, and artistic capacities and contribute meaningfully to society. In most of his seminal essays like "Nature" (1836), "Self-Reliance"

10 Schneider and Smith quoted in Bellah *Habits of the Heart*, p. 149. For further reading see David M. Schneider and Raymond T Smith, *Class Differences and Sex Roles in American Kinship and Family Structure* , Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice Hall, 1973.

(1841), "The American Scholar" (1837), "Society and Solitude" (1857), we come across the importance of nurturing one's inner resources while engaging with the external world, suggesting that true individuality is achieved through a harmonious balance of self-improvement, economic agency, and moral integrity. In theory, the self-culture that Emerson promotes is a universal principle and aligns closely with Kant's idea that "our duties towards ourselves constitute the supreme condition and the principle of all morality" (121):

> Far from ranking low in our scale of precedence, our duties towards ourselves are of primary importance and should have pride of place; for … it is obvious that nothing can be expected from a man who dishonours his own person. . . . A man who performed his duty to others badly, who lacked generosity, kindness and sympathy, but who nevertheless did his duty to himself by leading a proper life, might yet possess a certain inner worth; but he who has transgressed his duty towards himself, can have no inner worth whatsoever. (117-18)

According to Kant's 'moral self,' individuals must fulfill their duties not only to others but also to themselves. In his view, transgressing one's duty to oneself results in a profound loss of worth: "He who transgresses against himself loses his manliness and becomes incapable of doing his duty towards his fellows" (118). Here, Kant emphasizes that failing to adhere to one's moral obligations diminishes an individual's capacity to act justly towards others. Emerson also highlights the interconnectedness of self-respect and ethical responsibility, and both believe that true worth and dignity are derived from individuals' identities as moral beings. However, what drastically differentiates Emerson's philosophical stance (and, in parallel, the moral individualistic behavior of many Americans) is how this moral self is constituted and understood. For Kant the moral self is constructed through rational deliberation, where practical reason guides individuals to discern their duties and act accordingly. For Emerson, it is shaped by 'moral intuition' and an innate moral nature. It is the personal experiences and an intrinsic sense of moral direction that guide the individual's path of right and wrong, Gustaaf Van Cromphout, an Emerson studies scholar, states that Emerson "repeatedly emphasizes the will's need to be 'educated' through struggle, and he therefore stresses such qualities of character as courage, perseverance and resilience" (77). Indeed, for Emerson,

moral growth was a dynamic process that required effort and self-reflection; thus, cultivating moral intuition through life's challenges would eventually lead to greater self-reliance and personal autonomy. He believed that an individual who earned wealth through their labors demonstrated a high cultivation of worldly understanding and self-reflection, attained through proper reasoning, patience, and the cultivation of the soul. In this context, Emerson's concept of "moral intuition" bears a closer resemblance to the ideas of Lord Herbert of Cherbury, often regarded as the originator of the central ideas of Deism, than to those of Immanuel Kant. Herbert states, "It is not from the external world that we learn what we ought to follow, what we ought to avoid. Such knowledge is within ourselves" (quoted in Schneewind, 180). In his book *The Invention of Autonomy*, Jerome B. Schneewind highlights the significance of Lord Herbert of Cherbury by noting that he was the first thinker to link the interplay between the "inner truths of conscience" (180) and human intuition with the idea of self-governance: "the first to propose the main epistemological tenet of what we now think of as intuitionism, although it was well over a century before the label came to be applied to such views" (181).

Emerson's emphasis on personal experiences and moral intuition resonates powerfully in the heart of American culture. The individual's inner voice, his conscience, becomes the highest authority, encouraging a strong reliance on personal judgment over social rules. Thus, while the material dimension of individualism leads the person to break free from a collective will and assume full responsibility, the moral dimension of individualism envisions the individual not only as a solitary achiever but also as an ethical agent, capable of charting a course guided by personal conviction and intrinsic values. Consequently, moral decision-making in American individualism often revolves around what feels right to the individual, without extensive consideration of other people's personal needs or expectations. Nevertheless, the prioritization of individual conscience in American culture does not entirely exclude the notion of collective conscience since the value of individualism itself uniquely characterizes the collective conscience. As the United States lacks the usual bonds for collective unity—such as ethnic and cultural homogeneity or a common historical tradition—it achieves strong national cohesion through its American Creed, a belief system in which the natural rights of the individual play a central role in its goals of collective behavior. This means that even

when individuals prioritize personal goals and self-interest over communal responsibilities, it does not necessarily result in "bad conscience" or guilt. The societal norms do not penalize this behavior; rather, they support it, reflecting a broader acceptance that the pursuit of individual freedom is a central moral value.

To fully understand how the material and moral dimensions of individualism coexist in American culture without inherent contradiction, one must turn to Étienne Balibar's concept of "reflexive individualism." Reflexive individualism, according to Balibar, lends content to the idea of a "sovereignty of the subject" that consists precisely in the "absolute right to judge oneself" (208). The sovereignty of the subject, that judges itself, however, is not an isolated or purely self-interested subject, but as Balibar immediately specifies, is contingent upon the individual bearing "the community within himself":

> . . . the individual bears the community within himself, or better, the law of the community (which is precisely what makes him a "subject"). The subject, therefore, is doubled with respect to the instance of the law, which is one and the same time universalized and internalized. From this doubling, principally, derive all the "dualisms" of the empirical and the transcendental (or the "subject of fact" and the "subject of right"), the moral and the juridical (respectively related in Kant to the obligation of conscience and state coercion), and the general and the particular (or community and individuality). (208)

In this framework, the American subject is "doubled with respect to the instance of the law," where the law in the United States is rooted in the American foundational principles of natural rights—the right to life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness. These rights, enshrined in the Declaration of Independence, serve not only as legal protections but also as moral imperatives that guide individual actions and societal norms. As Balibar points out, these rights are "both universalized and internalized," meaning they are not only universally recognized as part of the collective social contract but also deeply ingrained within the individual's moral compass, framing their sense of autonomy and self-governance. Taken together, this dual dynamic that "makes the individual, bearer of moral and social universality, into the constituent power of the State

and the subject of the historical community" underscores how in the United States the conscience and the state, intuition and rationality, lived realities and aspirational ideals, all converge to cultivate what Tocqueville aptly describes as the most individualistic culture in the world—a society where individuals "owe no man anything and hardly expect anything from anybody" (quoted in Bellah, 37). Consequently, it can be argued that American individualism, as both a legal right and a core moral imperative, draws its distinct character, in Balibar's words, as an "institutional expression of 'moral personality'" (209).

2

RETHINKING AUTONOMY THROUGH HAWORTH, CHODOROW AND GILLIGAN

The widespread tendency in the United States to equate autonomy with individualism has blurred the crucial distinctions between the two concepts, obscuring their implications for female agency and identity. This tendency to regard autonomy as synonymous with individualism can also be seen in the following argument by Jeremy Rifkin, one of the most popular social and economic thinkers, with more than twenty best-selling books. In his book *The European Dream: How Europe's Vision of the Future is Quietly Eclipsing the American Dream*, Rifkin explores how personal autonomy and financial prosperity are intricately intertwined within the individualistic ethos of the American people:

> For us, freedom has long been associated with autonomy. If one is autonomous, he or she is not dependent on others or vulnerable to circumstances outside of his or her control. To be autonomous, one needs to be propertied. The more wealth one amasses, the more independent one is in the world. One is free by becoming self-reliant and an island unto oneself. With wealth comes exclusivity, and with exclusivity comes security. (13)

As Rifkin states clearly, the conditions of being autonomous in the United States depend upon being "propertied" and becoming an "island unto oneself" detached from the need for external validation, support, or connection. Rifkin uses the term "autonomy" in a culturally specific sense, framing it around the

values of American individualism, particularly wealth, success, solitude, and exclusivity. This is not surprising, given the fact that the word "autonomy" has traditionally been thought to connote independence and assumptions of individualism. Understood as self-governance, autonomy can be defined as "the ability to shape our own lives and to live authentically rather than being directed by external forces that manipulate or distort us" (Veltman and Piper 1). Moreover, autonomy incorporates essential concepts such as "competence," "self-reflection," "authenticity," "moral agency," "self-legislation," and the capacity to align personal actions with internally defined principles. As such, a comprehensive understanding of autonomy that transcends the atomistic conception of the self is essential for comprehending the broader dimensions of self-governance, as well as its implications for female agency and the socio-cultural forces that constrain or enable women's autonomy.

Lawrence Haworth provides a detailed definition of autonomy's meaning and historical evolution in his work *Autonomy: An Essay in Philosophical Psychology and Ethics* (1986). According to Haworth, the term 'autonomy' originates from the Greek words autos (self) and nomos (law), signifying 'self-rule'—the condition of living in accordance with laws one imposes upon oneself, as opposed to being under the control of another. Haworth notes that the ancient Greeks did not apply this term to individuals, as we do in modern discourse when referring to 'personal autonomy,' but rather to city-states. In this context, 'Self-rule,' one may say, does not automatically follow from the achievement of independence. Athens becomes independent after the Spartans leave. That does not guarantee self-rule, however, but only its possibility. For its actual achievement, the city requires rules, which the people must follow" (11). Haworth's analysis underscores that autonomy is not just about freedom from external control, but also involves the active self-governance of individuals or communities through self-imposed regulations or principles.

Haworth's conceptualization of autonomy begins with the premise that self-rule, or autonomy, is intricately linked to one's competence as an agent. As he argues, "The beginnings of autonomy are to be traced back to one's first signs of competence as an agent" (16). Without competence, Haworth posits, there is no self, and consequently, no self-rule. This insight highlights a fundamental point: autonomy is not merely the absence of external control, but is rooted in the individual's ability to act intentionally and competently. To be an agent—

capable of self-governance—requires awareness of one's actions, the internal recognition that one is capable of achieving intended outcomes.

In extending this understanding, Haworth's work also explores various modes of self-awareness that underpin this sense of agency. As he outlines, self-awareness manifests in multiple forms: first, through the "self-concept", which includes the mental constructs we have about ourselves; second, through feelings of "self-esteem," which are closely tied to both one's sense of competence and the judgments others make of us; and third, through a sense of "competence" itself, which reflects the subjective experience of being effective in one's actions (15-16). As Haworth explains, "one has opinions concerning what one can and cannot do. These opinions are components of one's self-concept. But in addition, one experiences the state of being competent" (Haworth 15). This sense of competence, therefore, plays a crucial role in shaping one's autonomy. Haworth further distinguishes the dimensions of competence, noting that it is both a recognition of one's ability to produce intended effects and an awareness of how one performs, which contributes to a sense of confidence—or its absence—regarding one's abilities (16). This dual aspect of competence—internal agency and self-assurance—are foundational to autonomy, allowing the individual to align their actions with self-imposed goals and values.

Notably, what sets Haworth apart from other scholars and thinkers on autonomy is his emphasis on the integral role of "critical self-reflection" as a defining characteristic of autonomy. He identifies critical self-reflection as a fundamental process by which individuals critically assess their desires and actions within the context of their overarching values and principles, thereby cultivating a deeper and more authentic form of self-governance. He explains that the critical stages are when a person "adopt[s] an evaluative stance toward his own desires and then begin[s] to reflect critically on that evaluative stance" (Haworth 2). This critical self-reflection involves the individual moving beyond merely internalized evaluations from external sources, such as parents or other significant others, to a more profound self-rule, wherein the individual actively questions whether those evaluations align with his/her 'authentic' desires and values.

Haworth further elaborates that autonomy is not simply about achieving independence or competence but is about the capacity for self-examination and reflection (2). Critical self-reflection, as part of the broader framework

of autonomy, is what allows individuals to align their actions with internally defined principles, rather than simply reacting to external pressures or societal expectations. This reflective process enables the individual to make choices that are authentic to their sense of self, even within the limitations of social structures. For autonomy to be genuinely realized, it requires an active and ongoing process of questioning one's values, understanding one's desires, and ultimately choosing a path that is both self-determined and reflective of a deeper moral commitment. The relationship of moral agency to personal autonomy, especially for women's autonomy is also highlighted in Marilyn Friedman's work *Autonomy, Gender Politics*. Friedman argues that genuine personal autonomy requires using one's own desires, values and commitments as a foundation for reflection and decision- making, viewing the self not as fixed, but as a "life project" -something that can be shaped, nurtured and fulfilled based on "one's cares and concerns" (51).

This process of self-reflection aligns well with the constructivist perspective on autonomy, which views autonomy as the result of ongoing social interaction, personal growth, and internalization of values, rather than a purely isolated or individualistic pursuit. It emphasizes that critical self-reflection is not just an intellectual exercise, but a practical, lived experience that shapes and informs the individual's capacity for self-governance. In line with this, Haworth contrasts different forms of self-control and independence. He notes that "minimal autonomy involves self-control in respect of the means by which ends are pursued, whereas the autonomy associated with a normal adult involves self-control in the further sense of control effected by critical reflection on the ends which these means serve" (Haworth 18). This distinction is crucial for understanding the deeper form of autonomy associated with adulthood, which involves not just acting in a competent manner, but also critically evaluating one's goals and motivations in order to make truly self-determined choices.

Moreover, the effect of critical reflection on autonomy is transformative. As Haworth writes, the individual who engages in critical self-reflection "severs the ties to others that result from slavishly mimicking their preferred way of realizing the goal" (Haworth 28). By reflecting on their reasons for acting, individuals gain procedural independence (freedom from external control that emerges through thoughtful self-examination) rather than merely through routine or external validation. This process marks a qualitative change

in autonomy, as it enables the individual to live authentically, guided by their principles rather than the influences of others. Hence, the dimensions of competence, critical self-reflection, and transformative change are central to Haworth's conceptualization of autonomy, illuminating the essential processes by which autonomy is enacted.

To extend Haworth's philosophical foundation of autonomy to a more feminist sociological and psychological framework, Nancy Chodorow's insights into gender identity formation provide a critical connection. While Haworth emphasizes autonomy as self-rule and self-legislation, underscoring the dimensions of competence, critical self-reflection, and transformative change as essential processes for achieving authentic self-governance, Chodorow explores how early relational experiences, particularly with the primary caregiver, fundamentally shape the capacity for self-governance and individuality. Particularly in *The Reproduction of Mothering*, Chodorow provides an eye-opening perspective on why women continue to find themselves in a particular social and economic situation that suppresses their individuality. Chodorov, taking Robert Stoller's statement that gender identity is irreversibly formed by the age of three as a starting point, analyzes how the gender of the primary caretaker (mother-female) begins to play an important role in a child's identity formation. Chodorow argues that female identity formation unfolds within a framework of ongoing, continuous connection. Mothers typically view their daughters as extensions or continuations of themselves, fostering a bond that is rooted in similarity and emotional intimacy. As a result, girls come to see themselves in relation to their mothers, experiencing themselves as "like" their mothers, which promotes a strong sense of attachment and empathy in their development. In contrast, male identity formation occurs in a context of gradual separation. Mothers perceive their sons as distinct from themselves, viewing them as fundamentally different in gender. This perception sets the stage for boys to define themselves in opposition to the maternal (and thus feminine) identity. Boys respond to this difference by creating firm ego boundaries, distancing themselves from the feminine, and building their sense of self through differentiation. Consequently, for Chodorow, the developmental path for girls, which emphasizes empathy and relationality, contrasts with male identity formation that focuses on separation and individuality:

> Because of their mothering by women, girls come to experience

> themselves as less separate than boys, as having more permeable ego boundaries. Girls come to define themselves more in relation to others. Their internalized object-relational structure becomes more complex, with more ongoing issues. These personality features are reflected in superego development. (93)
>
> . . .
>
> By contrast, the boy's 'active attachment' to his mother expresses his sense of difference from and masculine oppositeness to her, in addition to being embedded in the oedipal triangle. It helps him to differentiate himself from his mother, and his mother from his father. (97)
>
> . . . .
>
> Feminine personality comes to be based . . . more on retention and continuity of external relationships. From the retention of pre-oedipal attachments to their mother, growing girls come to define and experience themselves as continuous with others; their experience of self contains more flexible or permeable ego boundaries. Boys come to define themselves as more separate and distinct, with a greater sense of rigid ego boundaries and differentiation. The basic feminine sense of self is connected to the world, the basic masculine sense of self is separate. (169)

Chodorow suggests that while girls emerge from the Oedipal period with a base for empathic relatedness to others, boys emerge with a tendency toward defensive autonomy. This difference, she argues, is not biologically preordained but is shaped by social expectations and maternal attitudes, which influence how children internalize gender roles and identities.

Carol Gilligan further explores the emphasis on relationality and connection in *A Different Voice*. Gilligan builds on Chodorov's argument by highlighting how these early relational experiences influence women's moral reasoning and sense of self. While Chodorow focuses on identity formation through attachment, Gilligan examines how this relational orientation shapes women's decision-making and ethical frameworks:

> But the appearance of this judgment [the judgment of self-selfishness] in the moral conflicts described by contemporary women brings into focus the role that the concept of rights plays in women's moral development. These conflicts demonstrate the continuation through time of an ethic of responsibility as the center of women's moral concern, anchoring the self in a world of relationships and giving rise to activities of care, but also indicate how this ethic is transformed by the recognition of the justice of the rights approach. (132)

Gilligan observes that women's sense of integrity often stems from an ethic of care, while men's from an ethic of justice. prioritizes responsibility and empathy over individualistic pursuits. Boys define themselves in contrast to the feminine, represented by their mothers, leading to the strengthening of ego boundaries and the pursuit of individuation. In contrast, girls often develop within a framework of ongoing relationships, identifying closely with their mothers and perceiving themselves as similar and interconnected. This process emphasizes attachment and empathy. While men often find their gender identity threatened by intimacy, women struggle with individuation. This dynamic causes men to struggle with relationships and women to face challenges in asserting their independence.

This ethics of care provides valuable insight into the dual pressures women face: balancing the demands of autonomy with the relational responsibilities ingrained in their identity. Together, Chodorow and Gilligan illustrate how these dynamics contribute to the societal and internal conflicts that women face as they strive to reconcile their ambitions with the expectations of care and connection. The outcome, therefore, for both Chodorov and Gilligan, is that women often develop a more relational self, one that is attuned to emotional connection and empathy. In contrast, men tend to form an individualistic self that values autonomy and separation from others. For men, this model of moral reasoning fits neatly within a cultural context that promotes separation and independence as markers of maturity. Men develop a sense of self that emphasizes individuality and separation, making it easier for them to internalize these material-based, performance-oriented values. For them, the moral compass is naturally aligned with societal expectations of success,

strength, and independence, which prioritizes the self over others, or at the very least, the self before others.

When individualism shapes both the structure of American society and the millions of personal lives, for women, reconciling their relational self with the demands for self-reliance can be challenging. On one hand, women are expected to cultivate independence and assert their individuality; on the other hand, societal expectations, combined with their moral reasoning and relational approach to self-care, make it more complicated for women to achieve the same autonomy and success that men often attain more easily. This paradox, as highlighted by Chodorov, is not only rooted in societal expectations but also in the way women are socialized to view the world, grounded in attachment and emotional connection. This relational orientation fosters empathy and care but also makes it harder for women to value independence and self-assertion from a masculine point of view. Since they are not socialized to be aggressively self-assertive and emotionally distant from others, their understanding of individualism does not focus on asserting themselves apart from or against others.

In examining autonomy through the lenses of Haworth, Chodorow, and Gilligan, it becomes evident that autonomy is not a monolithic concept but a multifaceted process shaped by philosophical ideals, relational experiences, and moral reasoning. Haworth's dimensions of competence, critical reflection, and transformative change provide a robust framework for understanding autonomy as a procedural conception. Procedural views, which focus on the processes through which individuals form their desires, motives, and decisions, emphasize value-neutral capabilities, such as critical reflection, authenticity, and coherent self-organization, as the basis for autonomy. These capabilities, proponents argue, enable individuals—particularly women operating within oppressive social structures—to exercise authority over their lives without being bound to predefined normative frameworks. Chodorow's insights into relational identity formation reveal how early caregiving relationships complicate and enrich the path to self-governance, particularly for women. Finally, Gilligan's 'ethics of care' challenges traditional notions of autonomy by emphasizing the moral importance of connection and responsibility within relationships. Together, these perspectives invite us to reconsider autonomy not as a solitary endeavor but as an evolving process—one that integrates self-rule with care, moral agency with relationality, and individuality with interconnectedness.

3

REIMAGINING AUTONOMY IN AMERICAN WOMEN'S WRITING: A FEMALE VISION

> I discovered that... I should need to do battle with a certain phantom. And that phantom was a woman and when I came to know her better, I called her after the heroine of a famous poem, The Angel in the House I did my best to kill her... She died hard. Her fictitious nature was of great assistance to her. It is far harder to kill a phantom than a reality. She was always creeping back when I thought I had dis-patched her.
> (Woolf Angel in the House
>
> 1384-85)

What does it mean to grow up female in a society that outwardly champions individualism and autonomy yet consistently stifles women's ability to fully embody these ideals? The answer to this question is not easy, especially in a culture where independence and progress are not philosophical ideals but a commonplace of experience. For while autonomy and self-reliance have been celebrated as cardinal virtues in the United States, the roles available to women have served, to use Virginia Woolf's words, as "phantoms" that have prevented women from realizing their true potential. Subsequently, while the ideal of individualism, with its distinctly way of thought, character, and conduct, asks women to pursue their own passions and ambitions, the narrow ideal of "true

womanhood"[11] pressures women to become good "mother, daughter, sister, wife-woman" (Welter 153).

These phantoms within, the deeply ingrained ideals of passive femininity and self-effacement, have also made it challenging for many American women writers to portray strong female characters striving for autonomy and self-sufficiency. This is not surprising, given the fact that women's inner aspirations and desires have always been considered transgressive within the normative structures of power and propriety. By being denied economic self-sufficiency, women have also been systematically deprived of the opportunity for deeper forms of fulfillment, namely self-actualization and moral autonomy. The few women who do manage to assert a degree of autonomy often do so at a significant cost; for even as they attempt to shape their futures around personal goals and dreams, they remain acutely aware that their actions will inevitably influence the lives of those around them. In such a context, core dimensions of autonomy—such as competence, critical self-reflection, and the capacity for transformative change—are not just discouraged but often redefined in ways that undermine female agency.

How, then, do these writers represent women who live in a world where the possibility of growth and self-determination is primarily seen as masculine? Do they resign their characters to the state of 'immanence,' or do they open up new ways of imagining purpose, identity, and self-worth within the very boundaries designed to suppress them? In other words, how do these women writers liberate the fragmented, conflicted female self from its persistent self-negotiation? Surprisingly, many of the female characters cultivate a moral dimension of individualism: a self-fashioned ethical compass that guides them within the limits they inhabit. Their female vision is not shaped by the pursuit of self-interest or heroic independence—the cornerstones of the masculine script of American individualism—but emerges sometimes through moral resolve, sometimes through strategic tact, and sometimes by being neither fully within nor entirely outside.

11 For further reading on the cult of domesticity and womanhood in American society that revolves around that celebrate subordination, self-abnegation, and piety, see Welter, Patterson, Bonventre, and Cruea.

UNMAKING THE SELF

Where female self-expression is suppressed and individuality persistently stifled, the act of reclaiming personal agency can come at an unbearable cost. "The Yellow Wallpaper" and *The Awakening* illustrate how the search for freedom within an oppressive environment often leads to self-annihilation rather than self-fulfillment. Both protagonists initially attempt to overcome the oppressions imposed upon them. However, as their yearning for self-direction deepens, they find no viable space for a life that honors their inner truths. Their defiance takes radically different turns—one moves inward, escaping into the realm of the mind. At the same time, the other reaches outward, only to realize that no space exists for the kind of autonomy she desires.

"The Yellow Wallpaper": Much Madness is Divinest Sense to a Discerning Eye.

Much Madness is Divinest Sense

To a discerning Eye –

Much Sense - the starkest Madness –

'Tis the Majority

In this, as all, prevail –

Assent - and you are sane –

Demur - you're straightway dangerous –

And handled with a Chain - [12]

(Emile Dickinson)

For Charlotte Perkins Gilman, a notable novelist and feminist activist of late 19th century, the pursuit of autonomy and self-expression was not just a philosophical question but a deeply personal struggle, reflecting her own

12 This poem can be accessed online. https://www.gutenberg.org/files/12242/12242-h/12242-h.htm#Series_One

life and work, as she sought ways to reconcile her creative and intellectual ambitions with the restrictive roles imposed on women. Born in 1860, Charlotte Perkins Gilman experienced firsthand the tension between societal expectations and personal aspirations. Her own struggles with depression, intensified by the limitations of a stifling marriage, impacted much of her writing. Charlotte Perkins Gilman's short story "The Yellow Wallpaper" is a deeply personal and political narrative that serves as a semi-autobiographical story, critiquing the oppressive conditions imposed on middle-class women during the late 19th century. Gilman's primary motivation for writing the story stemmed from her own oppressive experience with the "rest cure." After going through a nervous breakdown in 1886, Dr. Silas Weir Mitchell, a nationally recognized neurologist of the period who took care of middle and upper-class women, diagnosed Gilman with hysteria and prescribed the "rest cure" that mandated complete rest, coerced feeding, and isolation for an extended time:

> I was put to bed and kept there. I was fed, bathed, rubbed, and responded with the vigorous body of twenty-six. As far as he could see, there was nothing the matter with me. So, after a month of this agreeable treatment, he sent me home with this prescription:
>
> 'Live as domestic a life as possible. Have your child with you all the time' … 'Lie down an hour after each meal. Have but two hours' intellectual life a day. And never touch pen, brush, or pencil as long as you live.' (*Living* 96)

Dr. Mitchell's diagnosis and prescribed treatment embody the medical and societal attitudes of the late 19th century that functioned as a mechanism to control and restrict women. With no intellectual or creative activity allowed, the rest cure ultimately became a source of profound psychological oppression for Gilman, stifling both her physical and intellectual freedom. Dr. Mitchell's own book, titled *Wear and Tear: Or, Hints for the Overworked* (1871), reflects the dominant ideology of the time, especially, the deeply ingrained, condescending attitudes that portrayed women as fragile, intellectually inferior, and unsuited for the rigors of public life:

> To-day, the American woman is, to speak plainly, physically unfit for her duties as woman, and is perhaps of all civilized

> females the least qualified to undertake those weightier tasks which tax so heavily the nervous system of man. She is not fairly up to what nature asks from her as wife and mother. How will she sustain herself under the pressure of those yet more exacting duties which nowadays she is eager to share with the man?
>
> While making these stringent criticisms, I am anxious not to be misunderstood. The point which above all others I wish to make is this, that owing chiefly to peculiarities of climate, our growing girls are endowed with organizations so highly sensitive and impressionable that we expose them to needless dangers when we attempt to overtax them mentally. In any country, the effects of such a course must be evil, but in America, I believe it to be most disastrous. (40-41)

Dr. Mitchell's rhetoric does not simply caution women against physical or mental overexertion—it reinforces a deeply patronizing ideology that equates female ambition and drive with biological and mental fragility, associating intellectual aspiration with a "needless danger" rather than a right. Beneath the language of medical concern, Mitchell's argument effectively pathologized female intellectuality, reducing a woman's desire for anything outside her gender roles as a symptom of mental unfitness. Gilman sought to expose the dangerous implications of such medical and social practices that not only dismissed women's autonomy but actively undermined their psychological well-being under the guise of care and protection. In an essay she wrote for the *Forerunner* magazine in 1913, she writes that "The Yellow Wallpaper" was not "intended to drive people crazy, but to save people from being driven crazy" (*Why I Wrote* 20). By depicting the protagonist's descent into madness, Gilman dramatized not only the severe consequences of denying women intellectual and personal agency but also the broader societal tendency to misinterpret and belittle women's mental health struggles, particularly postpartum depression. At the time, conditions like postpartum depression were often dismissed as mere "hysteria," a term historically linked to the wandering womb,[13] an

13 Beginning with the Greeks, hysteria was considered as a disease of the wandering uterus. According to Rousseau in "A Strange Pathology," the wandering womb was the "extraordinary belief that the uterus, when deprived of the health-giving moisture derived from sexual

outdated and misogynistic belief that women's mental and emotional health could be disrupted by their reproductive organs. Gilman's portrayal of the protagonist's descent into madness under the care of her physician-husband reflects the dangers of such misguided diagnoses and the way women's genuine psychological suffering was trivialized, reinforcing their confinement to passive, domestic roles. Gilman's later life reveals the moral and existential struggles tied to her ideology. Following a diagnosis of breast cancer, she chose to end her life with chloroform. Her suicide can be interpreted as her own way to avoid becoming a burden to others, exemplifying the darker side of individualism for many women, where self-determination can be pushed to extremes in the absence of communal support or societal acknowledgment of their struggles.

Parallel to what she was experiencing, Gilman in her short story "The Yellow Wallpaper," tried to demonstrate how women needed autonomy, work, and creative outlets for their well-being, instead of the enforced passivity that patriarchal institutions and medical orthodoxy imposed upon them. In "The Yellow Wallpaper," Gilman's protagonist, much like herself, finds that the only escape from her oppressive situation is a descent into madness, which paradoxically becomes a form of self-liberation. The narrator's confinement is deeply tied to societal expectations of women, particularly the rigid roles assigned to mothers. Unable to care for her child in the way society demands, the narrator of "The Yellow Wallpaper," is deemed unfit and weak, confined within the walls of her nursery-turned-prison. In this sense, her oppression is not merely an individual struggle but part of a larger systemic pattern: women who do not meet patriarchal expectations are rendered invisible, stripped of their individuality, and metaphorically (or literally) locked away. Her inability to care for her child as expected leads to her forced isolation within the nursery—a room that transforms from a space meant for children into a prison for the mother herself. Her powerlessness is evident when she describes the room: "It is a big, airy room, the whole floor nearly, with windows that look all ways, and air and sunshine galore. It was nursery first and then playground and gymnasium, I should judge; for the windows are barred for little children, and there are rings and things in the walls." (7). The bars on the windows suggest

intercourse, would rise up into the hypochondrium (located between the stomach and the chest) in quest for nourishment. Such predictable wandering . . provoked painful sensations of oppression, constriction, and choking, sometimes leading to vomitting, forced breathing and spasm" (118). For scholarly articles and resources that explore the historical context of hysteria and its association with the concept of the "wandering uterus" see Gilman et al, Micale and Veith.

that this space, originally intended to contain and discipline children, now serves the same purpose for her. She is treated as someone incapable of sound judgment, needing supervision and restriction, much like a child who must be controlled for their own good. Internalizing the belief that her lethargic and depressive state renders her unfit even for the simplest tasks — "Nobody would believe what an effort it is to do what little I am able — to dress and entertain, and order things" (11)— she begins to accept that her maternal presence may also be harmful. As a result, she withdraws from her newborn, not merely out of apathy, but also out of internalized doubt and imposed guilt: "It is fortunate Mary is so good with the baby. Such a dear baby! And yet I *cannot* be with him, it makes me so nervous" (11) [italics not mine]. Her emotional fragility together with her loss of motivation, is taken as evidence of her inadequacy for motherhood and with no social roles to perform, she begins to take notice of the yellow wallpaper and its shifting patterns.

This growing sense of entrapment and desperation is mirrored in the shifting patterns of the yellow wallpaper itself—a symbolic prison that embodies the oppressive structures restricting women's autonomy. As the protagonist's isolation deepens, she begins to perceive trapped women behind the wallpaper, their ghostly, creeping figures reflecting her own entrapment within domesticity and medical authority:

> Sometimes I think there are a great many women behind, and sometime; only one, and she crawls around fast, and her crawling shakes it all over.
>
> Then in the very bright spots she keeps still, and in the very shady spots she just takes hold of the bars and shakes them hard.
>
> And she is all the time trying to climb through. But nobody could climb through that pattern -it strangles so; I think that is why it has so many heads.
>
> They get through, and then the pattern strangles them off and turns them upside down, and makes their eyes white! (42-3)

The act of peeling away the paper becomes an attempt to free not only these imagined women but also herself, symbolizing both a literal and metaphorical rebellion against the societal pressures that kill and strangle her sense of identity: "Then I peeled off all the paper I could reach standing on the floor. It sticks horribly and the pattern just enjoys it! All those strangled heads and bulbous eyes and waddling fungus growths just shriek with derision" (51-2). This vision, however, is not merely a hallucination but a manifestation of her increasing self-awareness. Just as staring at any intricate design—or even a blank wall—long enough can lead the imagination to conjure images, - "I used to lie awake as a child and get more entertainment and terror out of blank walls" (16)—the narrator's fixation on the wallpaper becomes a psychological projection of her inner turmoil: "I never saw so much expression in an inanimate thing before, and we all know how much expression they have" (16). The imprisoned women she sees within the shifting patterns become projections of her own traumatic experience; in a way, symbolic representations of her trapped existence: "wonder if they all come out of that wallpaper as I did? I suppose I shall have to get back behind the pattern when it comes night, and that is hard! It is so pleasant to be out in this great room and creep around as I please!" (52-3). Her growing recognition of these figures parallels her realization of her own oppression. They become her guides, showing her a path to escape—even if it is a path full of danger. Each peeling becomes an outlet for self-expression and movement:

> As soon as it was moonlight and that poor thing began to crawl and shake the pattern, I got up and ran to help her.
>
> I pulled and she shook, I shook and she pulled, and before morning we had. peeled off yards of that paper. (48)

However, this moment of self-reclamation is also the point at which her grasp on reality fractures, as her identification with these imagined women pulls her further into psychosis. As Elaine Showalter explains, in psychosis, "the person experiences an acute division between the body" (*Female Malady* 317) where the "inner or 'true' self … relegated to the disembodied mind" (317) passively observes the actions of a "false self" inhabiting an unfeeling, mechanized body. This fragmentation is evident in the narrator's final transformation, as she no longer perceives herself as a singular entity but rather

as one of the creeping women she had previously only observed. She declares, "I've got out at last… in spite of you and Jane. And I've pulled off most of the paper, so you can't put me back!" (55). Here, "getting out" signifies not just a physical escape but a complete dissolution of her former self into the collective identity of the imprisoned women. Her mind, now dissociated, watches as her body carries out the frenzied creeping she once feared: "I suppose I shall have to get back behind the pattern when it comes night, and that is hard!" (53) This chilling admission reflects how the narrator, like the figures behind the wallpaper, has become entrapped in an endless cycle of confinement and temporary, illusory freedom—her mind bearing witness to a body that no longer belongs entirely to her. In a world that confines her both physically and mentally, she eventually comes to understand that mobility—however restricted—is key to regaining a sense of agency. Her creeping, a physical act that initially seems disturbing, is in fact a means of reclaiming autonomy. In order to fully grasp Gilman's symbolic language, it is essential to recognize the distinction between *creeping* and *crawling.* To creep is to move cautiously, deliberately, and—most significantly—unnoticed, while to crawl often connotes helplessness, associated with infancy, or submission. In a society that polices and suppresses women's actions, Gilman suggests that true freedom is only attainable when women slip outside the structures of surveillance—when they move unseen. The narrator's decision to creep at night, when she is least likely to be observed, underscores this idea: she can only reclaim her body and agency when the gaze of patriarchy is not upon her.

Despite the protagonist's capacity for critical self-reflection and her awareness of her position, she remains unable to alter her circumstances. She knows what would truly restore her health—engaging in meaningful work that stimulates her mind and spirit—however, she is denied the freedom to follow her own instincts:

> So I take phosphates or phosphites—whichever it is, and tonics, and journeys, and air, and exercise, and am absolutely forbidden to 'work! until I am well again. Personally, I disagree with their ideas. Personally, I believe that congenial work, with excitement and change, would do me good. But what is one to do? (3)

The narrator is very well aware that she needs intellectual stimulation

and creative expression, and that 'writing' will serve as an antidote to her declining mental health. She can critically reflect on her desires, actions, and the social frameworks that shape them. However, the rigid social and medical dictates of her period, render her thoughts powerless, as she is continually dismissed, silenced, and deprived of the autonomy necessary to reclaim control over her own mind and body: "I sometimes fancy that in my condition if I had less opposition and more society and stimulus — but John says the very worst thing I can do is to think about my condition, and I confess it always makes me feel bad" (3-4). Gilman makes it clear that as long as her husband and physician dictate the terms of her existence, her instincts and intellect will be continuously invalidated, trapping her in a cycle of enforced helplessness and psychological confinement.

Consequently, even though Gilman's narrator is able to recognize her suffering, her attempts at self-reflection are consistently undermined by the oppressive structures that dictate her reality. This tension between awareness and powerlessness aligns with Marilyn Friedman's distinction between "autonomy-conferring" and "autonomy-impeding" self-reflection, which provides a valuable framework for understanding the narrator's predicament. According to Friedman, autonomy involves both the ability to critically reflect on one's choices and the freedom from external interferences that constrain self-governance:

> Autonomy involves choosing and living according to standards and values that are in some plausible sense, one's 'own'. A plausible sense of 'ownness' involves at least two dimensions. First, someone must reflect in an autonomy-conferring manner in the particular choices she makes and the standards or values by which she must be guided. Autonomy-conferring reflection, in my view, is not confined to rational reflection … it also encompasses emotional … dimensions of personal processes. Second, the reflection itself must be relatively free of those varieties of interference that impede the achievement of autonomy . . . socialization does not as much impede autonomy, whereas coercion as such do so. (340)

While the narrator in "The Yellow Wallpaper" exhibits autonomy-conferring reflection—demonstrating an awareness of her situation and questioning the restrictive treatment imposed on her—she lacks the second crucial dimension: the ability to live according to self-determined standards due to oppressive social forces. From the very beginning of the text, she exhibits a degree of critical self-reflection, as she recognizes that writing can heal her and improve her mental well-being. However, her repetitive rhetorical question — "But what is one to do?"—also demonstrates helplessness in the face of external suppression that prevent her from acting in accordance with her insights. This dynamic aligns with Friedman's theory, which suggests that autonomy-conferring reflection alone is insufficient for autonomy if the individual is subjected to interference that impedes self-realization. The interference in the narrator's case is both overt and insidious. Her husband, a respected physician, actively dismisses her perception of her illness: "You see, he does not believe I am sick! And what can one do? If a physician of high standing, and one's own husband, assures friends and relatives that there is really nothing the matter with one but temporary nervous depression—a slight hysterical tendency—what is one to do?" (2). Gilman's narrator explicitly acknowledges her lack of power in defining her own reality. Despite recognizing the discrepancy between her lived experience and the medicalized narrative imposed upon her, she remains unable to alter her circumstances.

One of the most striking manifestations of the narrator's impeded autonomy is the act of writing in secrecy. Writing serves as an essential form of self-expression and resistance. Yet, the need for concealment renders it exhausting: "I did write for a while in spite of them," she confesses, "but it does exhaust me a good deal—having to be too sly about it, or else meet with heavy opposition" (30). The necessity of deception reinforces the idea that while she may engage in autonomy-conferring reflection, her actions remain constrained by an environment that systematically curtails her ability to translate reflection into autonomous living. She possesses the intellectual faculties necessary for self-reflection; nevertheless, she is denied the capacity to live by her insights due to patriarchal coercion. This creates a paradox where she is simultaneously aware of her stifling condition yet powerless to escape it, leading to her psychological unraveling.

This need for "secrecy" reflects the broader limitations imposed on women in patriarchal structures. Just as she is denied the ability to express herself through writing—one of the few intellectual outlets available to her—she is also denied from any form of meaningful physical activity. Even her simple desires for companionship and movement are repeatedly dismissed by her husband. She laments, "I sometimes fancy that in my condition, if I had less opposition and more society and stimulus— but John says the very worst thing I can do is to think about my condition, and I confess it always makes me feel bad" (3-4). Her husband's refusal to acknowledge her need for stimulation highlights how women's desires, in the 19th century, were invalidated under the guise of medical authority. Her longing for physical activity is similarly restricted, as she states, "I tried to have a real earnest reasonable talk with him the other day, and tell him how I wish he would let me go and make a visit to Cousin Henry and Julia. But he said I wasn't able to go, nor able to stand it after I got there" (25-6). John's authority over her body extends beyond mere medical control—it is an assertion of patriarchal dominance that infantilizes her and negates her agency. Even her simple desires for companionship, such as taking a walk or engaging in meaningful conversation with her husband, are dismissed: "I walk a little in the garden or down that lovely lane, sit on the porch under the roses, and lie down up here a good deal." Her walks are constrained, limited to small, contained areas, further symbolizing her lack of freedom. John, her husband, embodies the controlling force of male authority: he dictates every aspect of her life, silencing her thoughts and suppressing her will. Ultimately, her physical stagnation mirrors her mental deterioration, as the forced stillness of her body contributes to the creeping paralysis of her mind.

The narrator's eventual breakdown, though tragic, represents the emotional and psychological toll of a system that seeks to silence women's voices and aspirations. Yet, in her descent to madness, there is a symbolic assertion of freedom—an attempt to find a way to move, to assert herself, even within the rigid boundaries of her confinement. Madness, as opposed to passive submission, signifies an act of rebellion that is radical and alarming. It makes her act of self-determination a disruptive force. John's fainting—an unusual reaction for a figure of authority and rationality—exposes the fragility of patriarchal dominance when confronted with a woman who no longer adheres to its prescribed roles: "Now why should that man have fainted? But he did, and

right across my path by the wall, so that I had to creep over him every time!" (55). The act of creeping, once a symbol of submission, now becomes an assertion of power —a movement that threatens the male gaze. In stepping outside of the passive, obedient role expected of her, she forces John into the state of physical immobility that had been imposed on her. His loss of consciousness serves as an ironic reversal of control—while she, in her madness, has found a form of agency, he is rendered powerless in the face of her defiance. In this way, "The Yellow Wallpaper" challenges traditional notions of independence and selfhood, offering instead a deeply gendered and morally complex vision of individualism—one that acknowledges the costs of self-assertion in a world that seeks to erase women's agency.

Neither Within nor Beyond: Tragic Self-Assertion in Kate Chopin's *The Awakening*

When *The Awakening* was first published, it was met with widespread criticism, denounced as a scandalous tale of a woman who selfishly abandoned her domestic and social responsibilities in pursuit of personal gratification. It was not until the 1970s that the novel began to receive critical acclaim, recognized for its artistic depth and its radical interrogation of womanhood, autonomy, and selfhood. As interpretations of the novel evolved, so too did the debate surrounding Edna Pontellier's suicide. Some, like Seyested, have viewed it as "a triumphant assertion of her inner liberty" (81), while others, such as Skaggs, have argued that it represents "a defeat and a regression, rooted in a self-annihilating instinct, in a romantic incapacity to accommodate herself to the limitations of reality" (347). Contemporary scholarship continues to explore Edna's struggle for self-definition through various critical lenses, ranging from Darwinian and naturalistic[14] perspectives that frame her actions as a biological imperative to existentialist[15] and psychological interpretations[16] that examine

14 For a naturalistic interpretation of *The Awakening*, see Bender, Dyer, and Margraf. This perspective situates Edna's fate within the deterministic forces of heredity, environment, and social constraints, emphasizing how her desires conflict with the rigid structures governing her existence. Her awakening, rather than an assertion of free will, is seen as an inevitable trajectory shaped by biological and societal forces, leading to her tragic end.

15 See Wymard.

16 For a psychoanalytic interpretation of *The Awakening*, see Fox-Genovese, Wolff, and Ryan. Wolff characterizes Edna as exhibiting traits of a "schizoid personality" that cuts itself off from

her consciousness, agency, and resistance to societal norms.

The central question at the heart of *The Awakening* is a penetrating one: How can a woman discover her essential self and exercise her will and independence beyond the conventional values, beliefs, and traditions that suppress feelings, passions, and aspirations? However, Chopin's sense of a complex reality permits no easy answer to such a moral question. Instead, by leaving the nature and value of Edna's awakening essentially unresolved, Chopin illustrates the difficulty of distinguishing the appropriate relationship between the self and society (Ewell 143). Instead, she highlights the difficulty of such a pursuit, revealing that women who do not conform to social codes of marriage and motherhood are defined only by what they are not. As one critic, Maria Mikolchak, poignantly indicates, Edna is neither the "wife-woman" nor the "mother-woman." This absence of definition leaves both her and those around her in a linguistic void, rendering Edna invisible or an abnormality: "Indeed, if women are socially constructed as mothers and wives, then what does it make a woman who is not a wife and not a mother? Linguistically, such a woman does not exist or is considered an aberration, a spinster. But Edna is not even that, because she is married and has children" (33). By leaving the nature and value of Edna's awakening essentially unresolved, Chopin illustrates the intricacy of distinguishing the appropriate relationship between the self and society, revealing the existential cost of a woman defining herself beyond imposed roles. Indeed, an early narratorial comment defines the nature and difficulty of such a task:

> 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. This may seem like a ponderous weight of wisdom to descend upon the soul of a young woman of twenty-eight . . .
>
> But the beginning of things, of a world especially, is necessarily vague, tangled, chaotic, and exceedingly disturbing. How few

direct relatedness with others in order to sustain its identity and autonomy (Wolff 453). Ryan interprets her behavior as indicative of a "hypomanic" bipolar condition (256), while Fox-Genovese attributes Edna's struggles to childhood emotional neglect, particularly the absence of maternal bonding, which shaped her difficulties in forming stable relationships and a coherent sense of self.

> of us emerge from such a beginning! How many souls perish from the tumult. (406)

Chopin illustrates not only the urgency of Edna's need for self-understanding but also the difficulty of such an accomplishment. Edna must come to terms with herself both as a distinct individual and in relation to a world "within and about her." Encouraged to self-sacrifice rather than self-realize, women like Edna, in order to establish their self-integrity, had to overcome tradition as well as the inflexible borders of patriarchal social structures. Considered as valuable pieces of personal property, Creole women had to fulfill the slot of mother, wife and housekeeper and in return were provided with comfort, money and luxury: "They were women who idolized their children, worshipped their husbands, and esteemed it holy privilege to efface themselves as individuals and grow wings as ministering angels" 400). As a result, their ability to think and feel was gradually deadened and benumbed by an oppressive masculine world that denied any spiritual or personal freedom.

Like most women, Edna also married her husband not because of love but because she felt secure and comfortable with him and gave herself to a marriage that "was purely an accident, in this respect resembling many other marriages which masquerade as the decrees of Fate" (411). Edna's chief function is to care for her children, see to their meals, and act as a willing but undemanding sexual partner for her husband. She marries Leonce Pontellier as a dependent person whose experience in love has taught her to feel insecure; he is for her a father figure. Her own father represented not love but "Puritan" repressiveness. Edna's most vivid childhood memory is of "running away from prayers, from the Presbyterian service, read in a spirit of gloom by my father that chills me yet to think of" (409) and her later impressions of him is of a man "with his padded shoulders, his Bible reading, his 'toddies' and ponderous oaths" (468) whom she is glad to be rid of.

In response to her cold father, Edna develops a "character … of reserve" (406), an emotional restraint that she assumes as natural. As a result, she has only been able to love in fantasy, and all her loves have disappeared. First, there was the "dignified and sad-eyed cavalry officer" (410) who gradually faded and became forgotten. Then there was "a young gentleman who visited a lady on a neighboring plantation," and "the realization that she was nothing, nothing,

nothing" to him was a "bitter affliction to her" (410); he too went "the way of dreams" (410). And last but not least was the "face and figure of a great tragedian who began to haunt her imagination and stir her senses" (411). The hopelessness of this last infatuation is clearly seen when we learn that Edna would kiss passionately the cold glass that framed his photograph. Although she has never seen this tragedian, her impossible passion for him persists with an "aspect of genuineness" (411). All of these early loves, like her father, are unattainable, and when she meets Leonce Pontellier, whose absolute devotion flatters her, she feels safe because he is close and available to her. However, even though she feels safe in this safe, predictable, socially imposed marriage, she doesn't feel any passion or love for her husband.

Edna's inability to continue complying with her social role as an ideal mother and wife not only stems from her growing consciousness of the triviality of her functions as Leonce's wife but also from the lax Creole environment, which provides her a climate of psychological relaxation. The sensual atmosphere of the Gulf and the easygoing openness of the Creole culture work to loosen the "mantle of reserve that had always enveloped her," leading Edna to a new awareness of her body and the hidden self it expresses. As one critic indicates, Edna's "engagement to Leonce is only a recompensation for the 'great tragedian' on whose portrait she projected her adolescent passions and an equally romantic defiance of her Presbyterian father" (Elfenbein 141). Recognizing "no trace of passion or excessive and fictitious warmth" (411) in her affection for Leonce, Edna begins to have an impulsive pursuit of her youthful desires. She realizes that she does not want to walk the "daily treadmill of life" (425) but wants to wander through the tall, green grasses of Kentucky in which she used to when she was a child: "Sometimes I feel this summer as if I were walking through the green meadow again; idly, aimlessly, unthinking and unguided" (410). Interestingly, it is not only the "delicious picture" of the sea before her but also Madame Adele Ratignolle's sympathetic caresses, seductive voice, and her unaccustomed taste of candor that inspire the recollection of such a childhood memory. Even though Madame Ratignolle epitomizes the most salient features of the 'mother-woman' that Edna cannot feel sympathy towards, her womanly grace and charm intoxicate Edna, making her seem like the personification of romance and passion, "a first breath of freedom" (412).

However, it is such illusions of love that prepare Edna for her tragic

downfall. Her inability to recognize the dangers posed by the "candor" of Creole customs leads her to romantic illusions about finding genuine love and passion in such a conventional lover as Robert. Moreover, she cannot realize that Creole women can afford the liberty of obscene speech and superficial physical intimacy because they are very much secure in their Catholic convictions about the indissolubility of marriage. For Creole women, chastity can never be threatened. Their relaxed acceptance of life are only outlets which serve to protect this chastity, epitomized by Adele's freely relating "the harrowing story of one of her accouchements, withholding no intimate detail" (402) to a male friend; by Robert Lebrun's seeking out a new married woman for his romantic devotion each summer; and by the other guests' casual discussion of a sexual novel.

From the very beginning of the novel, Chopin indicates that Edna differs from the other Creole women not only with her outer appearance, her "graceful severity of poise and movement," (407) but also with her dual life – "that outward existence which conforms, the inward life which questions" (406). Edna, throughout her summer in Grand Isle, lives with contradictions and dualities that parallel her dual life. She is continually baffled by her behavior and feelings toward Robert and her husband, and fluctuates between apparent self-knowledge and apparent self-deception. Her continuous habit of retrospection and her physical mobility throughout the novel illustrate what is really different about her; she is not a "mother-woman." Her desire to walk aimlessly unguided in the "meadow that seemed as big as the ocean" (409) turns into a desire to swim far out "where no woman had swum before" (421). The second section of the novel shifts from the ocean to the city, where walking becomes, for Edna, an emotional and spiritual equivalent to swimming (Treichler 317). Treichler suggests that walking comes to symbolize the "tentative . . . self-exploration" (316) that must be undertaken if Edna is to attain the "freedom to move around." It is that freedom and the creation of an "I" that later encourages her to swim, move out of her husband's house, and, more significantly, to commit adultery. Walking, swimming, moving around, and "desiring" are all actions that complement Edna's self-exploration process. For she experiences a sense of power "to control the working of her body and soul" (421) and cannot return to her past submissiveness or the "sleep" of self-delusion.

Robert, being a by-product of a patriarchal Creole mentality, cannot

appreciate nor understand Edna's attempts to break free from such a confining "mother-woman" role that hinders sexual desire and individual transcendence. Robert can see Edna only in conventional terms, and he is shocked by her disapproval of his own "wild dream" (506) that Leonce can free her from her obstructing marriage. "I am," she insists, "no longer one of Mr. Pontellier's possessions to dispose of or not. I give myself where I choose . . ." (507). Unable to conceive of a woman apart from the conventional role of wife, or of 'passion' without a saving respectability, Robert quietly leaves. He is too "honorable" to disgrace their love with sex, too traditional to bear the consequences of Edna's new self. Robert cannot appreciate Edna's understanding of herself as the central person in her experience. Like most women, Edna does not define herself in relation to a man. Unlike Madame Ratignolle, she does not define herself in terms of her husband or in terms of her children. These deviations come with a heavy price.

Edna's awakening becomes not a linear journey toward clarity but one full of contradictions and impulses. Throughout the novel the sea is a powerful metaphor of her costly and ambivalent quest. Several critics have noted its symbolic and mythical significances – its sensuality and connections with Venus, whom the naked Edna seems to invoke in the last scene (Elfenbein 151); its Freudian echoes of "oceanic feeling," the longing to "recapture that [prenatal] sense of oneness and suffused sensuous pleasure" to which Edna seems subject (Franklin 517); and its double promise of infinity and solitude. Like the bluegrass meadow of her childhood, the sea evokes both fear and pleasure, a place with no beginning and no end: "As she swam she seemed to be reaching out for the unlimited in which to lose herself" (421). Both these two images, the sea and the bluegrass meadow of her childhood, reinforce the fact that Edna is a woman who celebrates herself as a separate and a sensuous person, defined only in terms of her own experience, not in relation to any other person. Striving for individual transcendence, she exhibits a pattern of acting upon her desires without a clear sense of what she is ultimately seeking. She tells the doctor, "I don't want anything but my own way" (510), yet she remains uncertain of what that way is. Painting does not satisfy her; the excitement of the racetrack and the company of her unconventional friends do not fulfill her; nor do the passion of Arobin, the presence of her indifferent husband, or the fantasy of Robert. Unable to relate to anyone, her restless pursuit begins to

reflect a deeper paradox—she longs for self-definition, but without meaningful relationships her independence cannot be meaningfully realized. According to Jennifer Nedelsky, autonomy is not merely an internal capacity for making choices but is also shaped by the relationships and social structures that either enable or constrain self-determination. Nedelsky argues that "to become autonomous is to come to be able to find and live in accordance with one's own law" but emphasizes that this process is inherently relational —"even what is truly one's own law is shaped by the society in which one lives and the relationships that are a part of one's life" (10). Without social structures and social relations that recognize and support a woman's self-determination — such as alternative roles for women beyond wife and mother— Edna's attempts at self-definition remain fractured and incomplete. Even Robert, whom she idealizes as a romantic escape, ultimately conforms to societal norms and leaves her, "melt[ing] out of her existence, leaving her alone" (513), forcing her to recognize her fundamental need to be herself and the impossibility of fully realizing that self within her society. This realization transforms her introspection into an irreconcilable dilemma —she becomes trapped in a self-awareness that has no viable path forward. Her search for freedom becomes an isolating and ultimately an autonomy-impeding endeavor, leaving her suspended between longing and isolation.

Without a path to reconcile her newfound sense of self with the world she inhabits, Edna is left with only the "abysses of solitude" (406). Thus, her awakening, though profound, turns into a painful and ultimately tragic struggle. The sea, which was the scene of her original awakening, becomes now the scene of her death. Her return to the sea becomes an escape from everyone in society, including her children, Robert, and all the "antagonists" who would eventually drag her soul to slavery:

> *Despondency* had come upon her there in the wakeful night, and had never lifted. There was no one thing in the world that she desired. There was no human being whom she wanted near her except Robert; and she even realized that the day would come when he, too, and the thought of him would melt out of her existence, leaving her alone. The children appeared before her like *antagonists* who had overcome her; who had

> overpowered and sought to drag her into the soul's *slavery* for the rest of her days . . . *Exhaustion* was pressing upon and overpowering her. (513-14) [italics are mine]

In her journey of self-exploration, Edna has become more tortured and wounded, and has realized that she doesn't possess "the courageous soul that dares and defies" (514). At the end, Chopin's protagonist prefers to return to the womb of the sea, to the freedom of the blue-grass meadow, rather than to live in the restricting boundaries of a Creole society. Her suicide, then, is not an act of surrender but the final assertion of her will. As she walks into the sea, she does so with full awareness of her decision, paralleling her childhood impulse to walk through the meadow to escape her father's strict Presbyterian household. Now, as an adult, the only escape from her husband, her lovers, and the unyielding expectations of womanhood is through a more permanent departure. She sees herself as a "new-born creature" (514), opening its eyes to a world that, though familiar, has never truly belonged to her. The sea, with its vast and limitless expanse, becomes the only space where she can exist free from societal expectations, though that freedom is paradoxically achieved through self-annihilation.

Unlike male narratives of individualism that often hinge on self-sufficiency and competition, Edna's struggle highlights the uniquely gendered challenge of balancing autonomy with relational roles. She is caught between the desire to assert herself and the reality that doing so will sever the relationships that have defined her existence. Her ultimate decision to walk into the sea is therefore both a rejection of the world that confines her and an acceptance of the fact that she cannot reconcile her selfhood with the demands placed upon her. In this sense, her act mirrors the paradox inherent in women's autonomy. While she exercises self-determination in choosing her fate, that fate is shaped by the very structures she seeks to escape. Unlike male figures of transcendence, who find liberation through solitude or conquest, Edna's journey ends with an assertion of control that is simultaneously a surrender. Her social world offers no space in which a woman can exist outside of marriage and motherhood without suffering grave consequences. Consequently, the freedom she seeks is ultimately unattainable within the confines of her world, leaving her with no alternative but to claim it on her own terms—even at the cost of her own life. Her final act—walking into the

sea—is not merely an escape from oppression but a response to her irresolvable dilemma. Recognizing that the two warring halves of her existence—societal obligations and personal aspirations—cannot be settled, Edna's inner voice turns toward a self-destructive path. Her death, like her marriage, is not dictated by fate but by a deeply personal and tragic reckoning with the limits of her own agency. Her final swim into the sea mirrors her childhood walks into the meadow to escape her father, but this time, there is no return.

Ultimately, Edna's journey becomes a search for alternative pathways to self-realization—routes that lie beyond the rigid boundaries of socially prescribed femininity—even if this pursuit culminates in a radical, self-destructive act of suicide. For the reader, her trajectory invites a deeper understanding of the painful contradictions embedded in female autonomy: that the pursuit of freedom, when denied social legitimacy or viable outlets, may lead not to fulfillment, but to annihilation. In this light, what initially appears as a pursuit of freedom often results in psychological fragmentation, reflecting the paradox faced by many women of her time. Edna tries to act as her own moral agent, wants to live by her sense of right and wrong, but in a society that offers her no real place to do so, the promise of individualism leads not to fulfillment, but to loneliness and loss.

MAKING ROOM FOR THE SELF

Some heroines, such as those in "The Yellow Wallpaper" and The Awakening, resort to self-destructive yet liberating acts, while others find ways to preserve a sense of self within the very structures that seek to confine them. This latter form of quiet assertion is evident in "A New England Nun" (1891) and "Janus" (1985), where the protagonists create comfort zones—carefully constructed spaces that offer them stability and a sense of control. Their paths toward autonomy may not involve overt rebellion, but they represent deeply intentional responses to the conditions of their lives.

To be autonomous, as some feminist theorists suggest, women must live in accordance with the dispositions of their authentic female selves.[17] Since each self is uniquely formed, no single kind of environment guarantees flourishing for all. For Louisa in "A New England Nun," shaped by a rigid Puritanical culture, the private domestic sphere becomes a sanctuary—a rare opportunity for self-possession. Though initially expected to marry out of obligation, Louisa ultimately chooses to preserve the carefully cultivated solitude of her home, where even routine becomes a source of personal authorship. Her refusal is not simply a rejection of marriage, but a protection of the self she has created within the limited space afforded to her. Andrea, the protagonist of "Janus," by contrast, operates within the public sphere as a successful real estate agent. Her home life, especially her marriage, functions not as a space of emotional intimacy, but rather like Louisa's —a protective frame within which she can safely compartmentalize and manage her complex desires. The bowl, a gift from a lover, becomes a symbol of her divided self—its emptiness, its glow, and its stillness reflecting her quiet resistance to being absorbed into roles

17 For further reading on theories of autonomy and authentic female selfhood, see Diana Tietjens Meyers, *Gender in the Mirror: Cultural Imagery and Women's Agency* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2002); Jennifer Nedelsky, *Law's Relations: A Relational Theory of Self, Autonomy, and Law* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011); and Marilyn Friedman, *Autonomy, Gender, Politics* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2003).

she has not chosen.

Ultimately, both Louisa and Andrea find a way to resist the roles imposed on them, not through open defiance, but by holding on to something entirely their own. For Louisa, it is the quiet order of her home; for Andrea, it is the bowl that anchors her inner self. These quiet acts of preservation become subtle expressions of women's autonomy, shaped not by escape but by the creation of inner boundaries where selfhood can survive.

Mary E. Wilkins Freeman's "A New England Nun": Finding Freedom in the Familiar

In her seminal and often-debated short story "A New England Nun," Mary E. Wilkins Freeman, a 19th-century local color writer of the New England region, subtly interrogates the very nature of female autonomy, illustrating how acts of defiance may manifest not as overt resistance, loud and confrontational, but through quiet acts of self-preservation, where habits and routine become expressions of selfhood. Many critics have interpreted Louisa's domestic life and her passion for order and precision in sharply contrasting ways—either as an autonomous pursuit,[18] where her housework becomes a creative and intentional expression of selfhood, or as evidence of "self-imposed alienation" (Csicsila 2). For instance, Harris views Louisa's devotion to household rituals not as passive routine, but as deliberate acts of self-determination, suggesting that her commitment to "aestheticiz[ing] the domestic" (31) transforms these tasks from mere necessity into a form of artistry, whereas, Hirsch describes Louisa's meticulous domestic habits as "obsessive neurosis" (125). As Cutter notes, this interpretive divide has generated a level of critical "controversy" (213) unmatched by any other short story in recent decades, transforming these tasks from mere necessity into a form of artistry. Consequently, the real question lies not in whether Louisa's actions are a consequence of personal conviction or psychological rigidity, but in how we understand the nature of agency itself. Freeman's portrayal complicates the notion of autonomy as an apparent triumph over societal expectations. While feminist critics such

18 See Pryse, Harris and Glassner. All three writers compare Louisa's devotion to cleaning, sewing, and distilling to that of an artist, and Glasser reads her housework similarly as being her creation, her craft.

as Glasser, Harris, and Pryce have celebrated Louisa's decision to break off her engagement as an act of self-affirming independence, such readings may overlook the deeper ambivalence embedded in her choice—a choice shaped as much by self-preservation as by self-determination, and by solitude as much as by freedom.

Louisa's decision is not a bold rejection of societal roles, but a quiet adaptation to the prolonged in-between state she has occupied for fourteen years—a fourteen-year engagement that has grown more symbolic than real. With her fiancé absent and her immediate family gone, Louisa finds herself relieved of traditional duties as daughter, wife, or caregiver. With no traditional gender roles to fulfill, society forgets her, but this forgetting grants her space, accidental, yet transformative. In the serenity of her secluded home, she begins to shape a life in tune with her own rhythm. Her days revolve around "methodical," carefully planned domestic rituals (3), performed without haste—sewing, polishing the china she uses daily, cooking, and cultivating the fruits and herbs she is especially fond of, all to satisfy her own refined tastes. She even uses her finest china every day —"something which none of her neighbors did"— turning habitual routines into meaningful acts of self-expression and quiet empowerment:

> Louisa was slow and still in her movements; it took her a long time to prepare her tea; but when ready, it was set forth with as much grace as if she had been a veritable guest to her own self. . . . They whispered about it among themselves. Their daily tables were laid with everyday crockery, their sets of best china stayed in the parlor closet, and Louisa Ellis was no richer nor better bred than they. Still, she would use the china. She had for her supper a glass dish full of sugared currants, a plate of little cakes, and one of light white biscuits. Also, a leaf or two of lettuce, which she cut up daintily. (2)

Even Louisa's supper meal, "a glass dish full of sugared currants, a plate of little cakes, and one of light white biscuits," arranged with careful precision with "a cut-glass tumbler full of teaspoons, a silver cream-pitcher, a china sugar-bowl, and one pink china cup and saucer"—reflects not only her aesthetic sensibility but also her deep need for control, order, and self-respect. These meticulous arrangements transform even her most ordinary acts of nourishment into rituals of self-affirmation, revealing the poignant fact that

a woman, in the absence of traditional relationships, nourishes herself with beauty, intention, and care.

All these household tasks, small gestures—chosen not out of duty but desire—become subtle expressions of selfhood, allowing her to treat herself with the same care and reverence she might offer a "veritable guest" (2). What begins as 'waiting' gradually transforms into authorship: a form of living shaped by her own rhythms and values. So when her fiancé returns, it is not anticipation he finds, but a woman who has turned loneliness into serenity, ritual to meaning; a sanctuary she will not surrender:

> In that length of time, much had happened. Louisa's mother and brother had died, and she was all alone in the world. But greatest happening of all--a subtle happening which both were too simple to understand--Louisa's feet had turned into a path, smooth maybe under a calm, serene sky, but so straight and unswerving that it could only meet a check at her grave, and so narrow that there was no room for any one at her side. (7)

With the loss of her mother and brother, and in the absence of relationships that could offer her a sense of purpose or belonging, she turns inward, listening to her own voice, now more audible and distinct in the stillness of her solitary home. Her long-standing care for her canary and dog, along with her attachment to the "little feminine appurtenances, which had become, from long use and constant association, a very part of her personality" (1), sustains a sense of intimacy and connection with her domestic world. Seclusion, while freeing her from the demands of social roles, also leaves an emotional absence—one she quietly fills by turning her home into a sanctuary. Drawing on Carol Gilligan's insight that women often define themselves through relationships, we can read Louisa's meticulous attention to her surroundings not as mere habit, but as a redirected form of relational care. In tending to her home with such devotion, she channels her feminine energy, once reserved for family, onto her daily rituals, transforming solitude into a space of purpose and self-direction:

> Louisa had almost the enthusiasm of an artist over the mere order and cleanliness of her solitary home. She had throbs of

> genuine triumph at the sight of the windowpanes which she had polished until they shone like jewels. She gloated gently over her orderly bureau-drawers, with their exquisitely folded contents redolent with lavender and sweet clover and very purity" (9).

Consequently, Louisa's home becomes more than a site of daily chores; it turns into a place of "sweet peace and harmony" (12) where her caregiving impulse finds new expression, allowing her to sustain a sense of meaning and purpose. Ironically, although Louisa shapes her home around her own rhythms and preferences, creating a space where she becomes her own artist, she remains unaware of the quiet freedom it has granted her. What sustains her is not a conscious sense of liberation, but the comfort of routine and the power of control. This lack of awareness becomes evident in her relationship with Caesar and Joe, and it culminates in the story's closing moments, where her sense of ownership and control over her environment covers the deeper, unexamined costs of such autonomy. For Louisa, Joe represents the chaotic intrusion of an external force into her domestic order, threatening to disrupt the carefully established …….

> When Joe Dagget was outside, he drew in the sweet evening air with a sigh and felt much as an innocent and perfectly well-intentioned bear might after his exit from a china shop.
>
> Louisa, on her part, felt much as the kind-hearted, long-suffering owner of the china shop might have done after the exit of the bear. (5)

Her unquestioned loyalty to her home and possessions—while offering her a sense of fulfillment—also demonstrates the self-imposed boundaries that shape her emotional life. Joe's return represents more than just the fulfillment of an old promise—it offers Louisa the possibility of a different kind of life, one shaped by spontaneity, emotional vitality, and the promise of shared experience. Having spent years in Australia, Joe carries with him a spirit formed in movement and openness—a contrast to the stillness and control that define Louisa's world. In many ways, Joe could have brought the passion, unpredictability, and human connection that Louisa's life quietly lacks. However, Freeman's heroine dismisses this possibility without hesitation, viewing his presence not as a path

to emotional fulfillment but as an unsettling force to the delicate order she has spent years perfecting. Like a china shop owner watching an unruly bear, Louisa endures his presence with silent dread—not because Joe is reckless, but because her world is so precariously arranged that even the gentlest movement feels like a threat. In truth, Joe is very respectful, deeply aware of her order, and reluctant to disturb it. But Louisa's New England sensibility, shaped by restraint and rigid routines rather than passion, leaves no room for spontaneity. Her home is not just a sanctuary but a domain ruled by habit and quiet discipline, sanitized from unpredictability. Nowhere is this more evident than in her treatment of Caesar, the old dog who, like her, has lived in quiet restraint for years. Once full of energy, Caesar was condemned to a lifetime of confinement after a minor childhood incident, his "sharp white youthful teeth" (10) turned into evidence of imagined danger. Though now "fat and sleepy...with dim old eyes" (10), Louisa still insists on his imprisonment, ignoring Joe Dagget's reassurance that "there ain't a better-natured dog in town" (11). In her mind, Caesar remains a lurking threat, capable of going on a "rampage" (12) where "innocent children bled in his path" (12):

> She pictured Caesar on the rampage through the quiet and unguarded village. She saw innocent children bleeding in his path. She was herself very fond of the old dog, because he had belonged to her dead brother, and he was always very gentle with her; still, she had great faith in his ferocity. She always warned people not to go too near him. She fed him on ascetic fare of corn-mush and cakes, and never fired his dangerous temper with heating and sanguinary diet of flesh and bones. Louisa looked at the old dog munching his simple fare, and thought of her approaching marriage and trembled. Still no anticipation of disorder and confusion in lieu of sweet peace and harmony, no forebodings of Caesar on the rampage, no wild fluttering of her little yellow canary, were sufficient to turn her a hair's-breadth. (11-12)

This exaggerated fear reveals not Caesar's temperament but Louisa's deeper psychological conditioning. Raised in a rigid, rule-bound New England culture, Louisa equates control with safety and order with virtue. Caesar's chain is not only a literal restraint but a symbol of her own internalized limits.

Just as she accepts his confinement without question, she adheres to the silent structures of routine and habit that govern her life, mistaking them for freedom.

Her attachment to Caesar—like her care for the canary and her "little feminine appurtenances...a very part of her personality" (1)—offers comfort, not liberation. These objects do not expand her autonomy but protect the illusion of it. Even the canary's "fluttering with wild terror" (12) at Joe's presence signals the threat his return poses—not because of who he is, but because of what he disrupts. Joe, like Caesar in his youth, represents motion, vitality, and change—all things Louisa's carefully ordered world cannot absorb.

Ultimately, Louisa's fulfillment lies not in claiming freedom but in preserving a life so thoroughly shaped by habit that it resists reimagining. The "cost" of her autonomy is clear: a life lived within boundaries so familiar they no longer feel like limits—just walls she has grown to like, because she built them herself.

The cost, then, is not what she loses, but what she never dares to imagine. Louisa's deep attachment to her orderly lifestyle prevents her from experiencing true self-discovery or emotional growth beyond the solitude of her home. While her serenity may seem self-fashioned, it is built on quiet denial of connection, of passion, of possibility. Simone de Beauvoir's critique of immanence offers a penetrating insight into Louisa's condition. As de Beauvoir writes, Beauvoir, "Every time transcendence falls back into immanence, stagnation, there is a degradation of existence into the 'en-soi'—the brutish life of subjection to given conditions—and of liberty into constraint and contingence" (27), Louisa's life exemplifies this retreat: what appears as autonomy is in fact a life circumscribed by habit and fear, shaped by norms so internalized they go unquestioned.

This quiet submission is most clearly revealed in how Louisa ends her engagement. Although she knows that Joe now loves Lily Dyer, she never mentions it. Instead, she claims that she has "lived so long in one way that she shrank from making a change" (15), framing her decision as a preference for routine. Her choice to conceal "her own inclinations in the matter" (15) is presented not as defiance, but as a tactic —"among her little feminine weapons," a way to avoid emotional confrontation by retreating into the safety of domestic order. This moment reveals that Louisa does not view her decision as a loss; she firmly believes she is preserving her world. What she fails to recognize is that

the life she has built, though comfortable, has narrowed her so completely that change itself feels dangerous.

This is made painfully clear in the story's final scene, where her tears—"she hardly knew why"—signal not awareness, but a vague, unexamined sorrow. Her morning relief, described as that of "a queen who after fearing lest her domain be wrested away from her, sees it firmly insured in her possession" (16), reveals a woman mistaking enclosure for empowerment. The narrator's closing line delivers the final truth: "If Louisa Ellis had sold her birthright, she did not know it, the taste of the pottage was so delicious… Serenity and placid narrowness had become to her as the birthright itself" (16–17). Louisa's contentment, then, is not a lie—but a limitation. Her autonomy, lacking reflection, becomes indistinguishable from submission—freedom mistaken for safety, and safety mistaken for fulfillment:

Consequently, even though, Louisa's daily routines fills her domestic sphere with purpose and individuality and transforms her home into what can be called, a "wild zone" (Showalter *Feminist* 200) --a space that exists outside the dominant male culture, it is clear that Louisa is not defying convention so much as she is managing it. The narrator's remark that "Serenity and placid narrowness had become to her as the birthright itself," highlights Louisa's lack of introspection. Louisa is not concerned with trying to understand the reasons behind her decisions. Her decision to leave Joe feels like the natural course of things. She is content with the narrow yet familiar contours of her life that have, in fact, become "as much a matter of course as breathing" (15). Her incomprehension of and blindness to her deep passions and desires raises questions about whether such choices genuinely reflect agency. She is what we might call an artist of immanence. Her artistry lies in how she arranges the constraints society has placed on her into something livable, even aesthetically pleasing. Her home becomes not only a refuge but a symbol of this paradox: it is at once a sanctuary and a carefully curated prison.

In "A New England Nun," Mary Wilkins Freeman's portrayal of Louisa raises profound questions about the nature of freedom and self-determination, particularly whether autonomy holds true significance if it is neither consciously claimed nor fully realized. Louisa's choices—shaped less by resistance than by habit and circumstance—become both her shield and her limit. Within the narrow confines of domestic life, she finds not transcendence

but self-containment—a restricted life, yet one she quietly claims as her own. In this personal space — however domestic it may be — she can develop a sense of "self-love" (Fetterley and Pryse 317) and fulfill her individual goals and desires. In other words, however involuntarily it may be, the interconnection and interdependence Louisa maintains with her domestic milieu — shaped by years of social isolation — brings her a fragile peace, a sense of fulfillment, and self-reliance. Her home turns gradually into a cage of her own making. However, as de Beauvoir warns us, such immanence—even when chosen—reflects "a moral fault" (27) for it reduces liberty to mere contingency and existence to stagnation. The life she creates is beautiful in its precision, but it remains untouched by introspection. She neither questions nor fully comprehends the boundaries she preserves. What she believes to be peace may, in fact, be containment. Freeman's narrative leaves us with a haunting question: Can a life so artfully maintained, yet so passively accepted, ever truly be called free?

Ann Beattie's "Janus": Not Quite Whole but Wholly Hers

Female autonomy in Ann Beattie's short story "Janus," similar to that in "The New England Nun," can be read as the deliberate and careful preservation of female space. Andrea, much like Louisa, constructs a private and controlled space to assert her autonomy. However, while Louisa's freedom is rooted in domestic solitude, anchored in timely and precise daily rituals, Andrea operates within the structure of marriage, preserving her autonomy not by withdrawing, but by carefully managing appearances and setting boundaries, having learned that in "a world full of tricks" (599), this is the only way to keep her authentic self intact. Though their strategies differ, their motives are very similar; both try to protect themselves from the vulnerabilities of love, exposure, and unpredictability.

"Janus" opens with an unusually intimate description of a cream-colored bowl—an object that, though outwardly simple, fascinates Andrea, the protagonist of the story:

> "THE BOWL WAS PERFECT. Perhaps it was not what you'd select if you faced a shelf of bowls, and not the sort of thing

that would inevitably attract a lot of attention at a crafts fair, yet it had real presence" (595).

The cream-colored bowl embodies Andrea's carefully maintained duality. It is elegant in its simplicity, "subtle and noticeable" (595), ordinary yet powerful, glowing "no matter what light it was placed in" (595) This enigmatic paradox, as the narrator pinpoints, is what initially attracts Andrea, a quality that would, over time, evolve into the very source of her emotional obsession.

As the story unfolds, the reader gradually uncovers the layers of meaning Andrea projects onto the bowl—values she holds dear, the lifestyle she has constructed, the unspoken desires and expectations she harbors. The bowl, in this sense, comes to represent Andrea's own "true" self: a self that appears strong and composed—"large enough so that it didn't seem fragile or particularly vulnerable" (596)—yet remains, at its core, breakable (598). For Andrea, a real estate agent, the bowl is far more than an object of aesthetic appeal; it is tied to both her professional and personal identity. It helps her close sales by appealing to a range of aesthetics, from rustic "country-style" to elegant upper-class "Biedermeier" (596). However, the bowl does not only help her persuade clients; it also boosts her confidence, her self-esteem, and enhances the very skills that bring her professional success—calculated maneuvering, emotional restraint, and strategic awareness. As a realtor, she understands the delicate art of influence—she must be persuasive without being pushy, understated yet influential. In short, the bowl, much like Andrea's life, is full of deceits and paradoxes—a carefully staged performance where everything appears seamless on the surface, yet underneath, contradictions persist.

The bowl's "glaze was the color of cream and seemed to glow no matter what light it was placed in" (595), a quality that parallels Andrea's ability to appear radiant and appealing while maintaining a secretive inner life. Much like the object itself, Andrea is a woman who reveals and conceals simultaneously. She is visible yet emotionally distant, successful and ambitious yet unfulfilled and lonely. As the narrator describes, "The horror was the possibility of the disappearance. That was what mattered. . . . She did not think beyond that-to what her life would be without the bowl" (598-99). Her fear is not just of physical loss, but of what that loss would symbolize: the collapse of a carefully guarded world, a concealed self she nurtures—one that thrives on quiet assertion, professional pride, and emotional autonomy, yet must remain hidden within the

acceptable facade of marriage. Just like the bowl's paradoxical nature, Andrea exists between two worlds—committed yet detached, visible yet emotionally distant.

As time passes, Andrea gradually becomes attuned to the subtleties of her reality, most notably, the emotional emptiness that lies beneath the polished surface of her outwardly successful life. Her marriage, though outwardly stable and defined by mutual compatibility —"both quiet people—reflective, slow to make value judgments. . . they both liked detail" (Beattie 597)— lacks emotional depth. Their relationship is marked less by conflict than by quiet detachment, a kind of practiced politeness that avoids intimacy. The narrator captures this distance in small, telling moments, such as the mechanical "exchanging of their news" (597) over meals or the 'sleepy disconnections' (597) murmured during the night. Her husband's worldview is shaped by the logic of finance, hers by aesthetic sensibility —a trait regarded by him as something impractical, perhaps even self-indulgent. Their bond, though outwardly functional, is devoid of intimacy, defined more by shared routine than shared feeling. Her husband shows no real interest in the bowl, a deeply meaningful object to her, while she similarly disregards his new Leica: "He had no more interest in the bowl than she had in his new Leica" (596).

In this emotional vacuum, the bowl becomes a symbolic substitute for the intimacy her marriage cannot offer, "a rival lover" (Phelan 193) —one that absorbs the meaning and passion absent from her personal life. In fact, day by day, Andrea begins to feel guilty for not telling her husband about the bowl, how it made her feel like "[t]here was something within her now, something real that she never talked about" (598), how the bowl "was responsible for her success. But she didn't say it. She couldn't begin to explain it. Sometimes in the morning, she would look at him and feel guilty that she had such a constant secret" (598).

The emotional void she feels in her marriage, Andrea tries to fill through a transient love affair. The bowl is a gift from a former secret lover, purchased at a "crafts fair" (599) after her lover notices how deeply Andrea is "drawn" to it. Though she initially insists she does not want to buy anything at the fair, she cannot bring herself to walk away from the bowl, instead lingering beside it, captivated:

> She had first seen the bowls several years earlier, at a craft fair she had visited half in secret, with her lover. He had urged her to buy the bowl. She didn't need any more things, she told him. But she had been drawn to the bowl, and they had lingered near it. . . . She tried to talk herself out of it. She owned other things that were more striking or valuable. It wasn't an object whose beauty jumped out at you; a lot of people must have passed it by before the two of them saw it that day. (599)

Andrea experiences an inexplicable, magnetic pull toward the bowl, an attraction that precedes any conscious decision or emotional context. Her lover buys her other various gifts intended to signify affection and emotional presence—a "child's ebony-and-turquoise ring" that fits her "little finger," or a "soft gray sweater with a pouch pocket" so that "when he could not be there to hold her hand she could hold her own" (599). Nevertheless, Andrea ultimately becomes "more attached to the bowl than to any of his other presents" (599). These earlier gifts, while thoughtful, are overt symbols of his desire to remain present in her life and shape her emotional responses, subtly reinforcing his possessiveness. In contrast, the bowl—chosen intuitively by Andrea and quietly acquired by her lover—carries her own personal signature. It represents a part of herself that she does not have to share, explain, or justify. In this way, the bowl becomes not only a vessel of aesthetic pleasure but a metaphor for her independence, silent, self-contained, and free from expectation. Thus, to interpret the bowl, as some critics have suggested, as merely a replacement or extension of her lover would be to oversimplify its meaning significantly. Her lover may be the one who purchased the bowl, recognizing her fascination, but the depth of Andrea's attachment develops independently, over time, as she gradually discovers more about herself.

Andrea's initial hesitation to purchase the bowl mirrors her broader uncertainty about the direction of her life, not simply between two men, but between dependence and self-determination. Her eventual decision to keep the bowl marks a quiet but decisive shift: rather than choosing between her husband or her lover, she chooses herself. Over time, she begins to associate the bowl with all her "clever strategies," her "unrequited good fortune," and her "success" (598). And unlike her relationships, the bowl makes no demands, carries no risks, and holds no room for disappointment: "She washed and dried

it without anxiety, and she moved it often, … without fearing an accident" (598). It becomes a version of an ideal relationship, one that allows her to act freely and exist without the weight of expectation.

In this light, the bowl is not a substitute for Andrea's lover, but a symbolic assertion of self. Once we realize the bowl's symbolic meaning, the title takes on new meaning: Andrea is a Janus figure—not "two-faced," as her lover suggests (599), but caught between opposing directions: past and future, concealment and exposure, longing and detachment. It is not a divided state, but a dual awareness —one that grounds her autonomy in the tension of opposites. Her sense of self is shaped through that threshold, a space that both protects and reveals. Her autonomy increasingly depends on how fully she develops her Janus-like awareness: knowing precisely what can be made visible, and what must remain concealed. She preserves herself through that balance, revealing just enough to maintain appearances, while protecting the parts of herself that cannot be risked. The bowl marks this paradox—perfect in its incompleteness, "cut in half, deep and smoothly empty" (599).

However, as the bowl's presence looms over her every interaction, Andrea is forced to confront the emptiness at the core of her carefully protected world. Her perception of marriage as a safety net aligns with her broader philosophy of maintaining control while avoiding full emotional entanglement. Unlike conventional narratives that frame marriage as an all-encompassing union, Andrea approaches it as a structured, familiar environment that allows her to exercise autonomy within its confines. Her marriage is not defined by passion or deep emotional fulfillment, but by predictability—a comfortable space where she knows exactly what to conceal and what to reveal. In this way, her relationship with her husband functions much like her relationship with the bowl: both offer stability, but their significance lies in what they allow her to maintain rather than what they provide emotionally. This ties into what William S. Wilson in his article "Ann Beattie's Implications" indicates, particularly the idea that *"*a whole as the absorption of parts*"* (91) does not always lead to fulfillment. The bowl, "meant to be empty" (596), symbolizes her chosen form of autonomy: she does not seek completion through another person, nor does she want to be absorbed into the structures that traditionally give meaning to individuals, such as marriage or family. She is unwilling to become subsumed in a relationship where she must surrender parts of herself, whether this be to a

husband or a lover. Its deliberate emptiness is not a sign of lack, but a space of self-possession, one that she maintains with intention.

Consequently, we can read Andrea's attachment to the bowl as a strategic act of private self-preservation; a way of reclaiming the strong, self-sufficient woman she is forced to conceal in her daily life. The bowl becomes a silent witness to her unacknowledged accomplishments, a source of quiet pride in a world that overlooks her success, and a surrogate companion that fills the emotional absences left by an indifferent marriage and a fading affair:

> … Andrea wondered how she could have left the bowl behind. It was like leaving a friend at an outing-just walking off. Sometimes there were stories in the papers about families forgetting a child somewhere and driving to the next city. Andrea had only gone a mile down the road before she remembered. In time, she dreamed of the bowl. Twice, in awaking dream- early in the morning, between sleep and a last nap before rising- she had a clear vision of it. It came into sharp focus and startled her for a moment- the same bowl she looked at every day. (597)

So when this "clear vision" suddenly appears in her dream, it startles her, "the same bowl she looked at every day" (597). For what comes into "sharp focus" is not herself, her husband, or her marriage but her dual self without distortion, one that grounds autonomy in the tension of opposites. Giving it up would mean giving up the most truthful, unspoken part of who she is, and that is something she can no longer do.

Andrea embodies the paradox of the bowl itself: perfectly balanced, seemingly whole, yet fundamentally hollow. She rejects the possibility of emotional fulfillment, fully conscious of her decision. Realizing that her life should not feel complete only when a man completes it, she chooses a life that prioritizes stability and self-sufficiency over love. Just as the bowl is "meant to be empty" (596), so is she. It is only when she fully accepts her loneliness as a permanent reality that she can live life on her own terms. The story concludes with this quiet realization, as Beattie allows her protagonist a moment of contemplative clarity:

> Alone in the living room at night, she often looked at the bowl sitting on the table, still and safe, unilluminated. In its way, it

was perfect: the world cut in half, deep and smoothly empty. (599).

The bowl, much like Andrea herself, remains half-full, half-empty, a half yin-yang, incomplete yet whole in its own way. Only by accepting this incompleteness can Andrea truly take ownership of her life, finding meaning not in relationships but in her own self-sufficiency.

In this way, Andrea's marriage serves as a space of independence, much like Louisa's home in "A New England Nun." However, unlike Louisa, who remains unaware of her quiet personal empowerment, Andrea is deeply conscious of it as well as the trade-offs she makes to preserve it. She understands that remaining married allows her to continue living on her own terms and that it is not about love or wholeness but about preserving the carefully structured independence she has built. Ultimately, the short story "Janus" explores how women like Andrea create "safe spaces" within the very institutions that confine them, allowing them to exert control over their lives without overtly defying expectations.

WOMAN-ON-THE-MAKE

It is striking that undomesticated, fully self-directed female characters are often absent from realistic women's writing. Instead, they surface at the margins: in stories where the protagonist is a child, or in speculative worlds where the rules of realism are suspended. These are not accidental locations; they are imaginative thresholds where culture loosens its hold just enough for female agency to assert itself.

This chapter turns to these narrative spaces, not as fantasy or escape, but as sites where autonomy is tested, redefined, and sometimes, against all odds, claimed. In child narratives, female autonomy is often legitimized through an appeal to the innocence and moral clarity attributed to childhood, or in the case of speculative fiction, the boundaries of the real are bent to allow what conventional narratives often deny. Thus, what unites these different genres is not their form, but what they make possible. They allow us to glimpse female characters who are not simply reacting to their environments, but shaping them; resilient girl protagonists armored in stamina and courage, ready to confront the world on their own terms; resourceful, fiercely independent women who carry the seed of change, recreating the terms of their existence.

Small Body, Strong Will: Ellen Gilchrist's "Revenge"

In "Revenge", Ellen Gilchrist introduces Rhoda Manning—a bold, self-assured 10-year-old girl who would later reappear throughout her other short story collections. Set in Issaquena County, Mississippi, the story captures how

a young girl's spirit is stifled not by dramatic events, but by the quiet, everyday limitations imposed by her family during World War II. While her father is away at war, her brother Dudley takes charge, following their father's letter urging him to train for the Olympics and to take care of Rhoda. Her male cousins and brothers' refusal to train her for jump vaulting makes her increasingly aware of her social positioning as subordinate. Confronted by a sharp and direct violence of gendered separation, Rhoda instinctively senses that access is granted to boys on the field, in language, in freedom of movement, and enforced through verbal and physical threats and emotional belittlement. So what begins as a desire to belong, to do vault jumping with her male cousins, sharpens into a deep need to defy, to push back against a 'gendered' discrimination directed and normalized as ordinary. Rhoda's act of resistance, therefore, should not be read simply as childish mischief but as a spontaneous awakening of a small girl whose 'invisibility' becomes unbearable, and whose retaliation becomes a form of self-assertion.

The story opens with Rhoda's description of the "Broad Jump Pit," a pit that "loomed" (336) in her dreams:

> The Broad Jump Pit, how shall I describe it! It was a bright orange rectangle in the middle of a green pasture. It was three feet deep, filled with river sand and sawdust. A real cinder track led up to it, ending where tall poles for pole-vaulting rose forever in the still Delta air. (332)

As readers, we immediately realize that this young narrator is fascinated by this pit because it stands in the middle of a green pasture, which represents for her an unlimited open space that stretches "forever in the still Delta air" (332). Not being able to run and jump in the middle of that green pasture she feels an "exile" imprisoned in the boundaries of her grandmother's house: "Think how it looked from my lonely exile atop the chicken house. I was ten years old, the only girl in a house full of cousins" (332).

Rhoda, by juxtaposing her "isolation" and her being the "only female child," expresses in a very subtle way that it is actually her femininity that is limiting her and denying her the freedom to do whatever she wishes. Thus, she feels resentment and bitterness not only for being excluded from the "broad jump" training (and hence being deprived of the thrill and action) but also for

being forced to play the role of a "dear sweet little girl" in a house full of male cousins. Rhoda's resentment intensifies with her father's letter, which shows explicitly where she stands in the family. Rhoda's father, in his letter, by juxtaposing "free men" and "sports" implies a relation between freedom and athleticism, freedom and masculinity, a relation that becomes more explicit when he urges his son and his nephews to train for broad jumping in the vast open fields of the Delta whereas for his only female child, Rhoda, he advises "proper eating habits" and asks Dudley, her brother, to take care of her. Due to her femininity, she is confined to the house and put under the protection of a brother who disregards her attempts to break away from such an entrapment. Furthermore, because masculine "selfhood" establishes itself through the marginalization or exclusion of "femininity," Rhoda's attempts to break away from such an entrapment cause only hostility, outrage, and violence among her male counterparts.

> 'Rhoda, you're not having anything to do with this Broad Jump Pit. And if you set foot inside this pasture or come around here and touch anything we will break your legs and drown you in the bayou with a crowbar around your neck.' He was twisting my leg until it creaked at the joints. 'Do you get it, Rhoda? Do you understand me?' … 'You've been ruining everything we've thought up all summer,' Dudley said, 'And you're not setting foot inside this pasture.' (338)

She will not play a part in either the construction of the "Broad Jump Pit" or in using it for training. These are considered to be "male activities," and hence, Rhoda, being her father's "sweet girl," is seen to be unfit for such undertakings that need effort, courage, and responsibility. However, the narrator does not want to be perceived as a helpless and sweet girl who needs to be taken care of and protected. She only wants to attain the same privileges that Dudley and her male cousins have. This becomes apparent when she expresses her jealousy of having to watch them pole-vaulting and broad jumping, and prays that her cousins get polio and be confined to wheelchairs, while she goes to Hollywood to participate in Olympic events.

Thus, the "Broad Jump Pit" operates not merely as a physical location but as a charged symbolic space that stands in direct opposition to the grandmother's house. The two locations form a binary structure through which

the story articulates the early gendered division of space, activity, and identity. While the Broad Jump Pit signifies masculinity, freedom, and self-sufficiency—coded through its openness, athleticism, and association with autonomy—the grandmother's house signifies domesticity, passivity, and the state of "immanence"—associated with servitude, containment, and little affirmation of individuality. What the protagonist glimpses in the contrast between these two spaces is not just a difference in environment but a fundamental difference in the possibilities afforded to her as a girl. The Broad Jump Pit becomes a site of projected power—a spatial metaphor for a mode of being that lies outside the feminized world she is expected to inhabit. Her longing to enter that space is less about sports and more about access: access to a realm where autonomy is visible, available, and unencumbered by the cultural weight of her small female body.

Therefore, Rhoda, by being excluded from "broad jumping" and "pole-vaulting," is not only being denied her physical freedom but also is implicitly reminded that she belongs to the category of the "other," and that "otherness" is tolerated only when repressed. The grandmother who defines her "self" according to these patriarchal assumptions epitomizes the most salient features of this category. Her place is at the "kitchen" cooking, looking after the children, and ensuring that they adopt their appropriate roles and act accordingly. Her grandmother cannot understand the anger and frustration that Rhoda is going through and disregards it as another "caprice":

> 'I don't know why you care what's going on in that pasture,' my grandmother said, 'Even if they let you play with them all it would do is make you a lot of ugly muscles.' Then you'd have big old ugly arms like Weegie Toler,' Miss Onnie said. 'Lauralee, you remember Weegie Toler, that was a swimmer. Her arms got so big no one would take her to dance, much less merry her.' (344)

The masculine codes and values of society are literally patrolling the territories of Rhoda's female selfhood. Her grandmother wants to raise Rhoda as a fragile flower, delicate and beautiful, and always under the protection of a man. However, Rhoda does not want to be protected or to get married. She wants to be as masculine as Laura Manning, because she has realized that adopting a masculine identity will give her the freedom she desires, will give

her a world with no limits and boundaries:

> I [Rhoda] threw my arms around her, burning with happiness, smelling her whiskey and Camels and the dark Tabu perfume that was her signature. Over her shoulder and through the low branches of the trees the afternoon sun was going down in an orgy of red and blues and purples and violets, falling from sight, going all the way to China. (343)

Because her sense of self begins to depend upon her capacity to reflect upon and articulate the domain of masculine experience, Rhoda begins to dictate her actions and thoughts accordingly. As war itself is associated with masculine values such as bravery, courage, and endurance, and as Rhoda wants to protest against her feminine positioning, she decides to wage war on her brother and cousins who threaten her freedom. Rather than taking up social positions of subservience and dependency, she wages war on everything that produces and legitimizes these patriarchal divisions. She constructs a small world war scenario and transforms her grandmother's house into a battlefield where her male cousins, the "nasty niggers, … Japs and …. Jews," (338) play the role of the enemy. Her female cousin, Lauralee Manning, becomes her close ally, and she herself becomes the indestructible female hero. Hate, envy, and rivalry begin to operate between her and her male cousins because a way of symbolic negotiation is not available. This sharp division between the enemy and the ally is explicitly revealed by the pronouns the narrator uses. When talking about Lauralee and herself, she constantly uses the pronoun "us," whereas when talking about her brother and male cousins, she uses the pronoun "them." For Rhoda, her brother Dudley and her male cousins represent the "evil forces" that try to encumber her with domestic duties; in contrast, Lauralee represents her ideal model, who will save her from this confinement with her fearless and masculine image.

Waging war on her cousins, the narrator begins to employ the language of warfare—a masculine terminology in itself—when describing the people and events around her. She describes Dudley as the "self-appointed leader" who "gathers his troops and heads for the pasture" (341) and thinks that her cousins are "plotting against her" while she "sleep[s] beneath her grandmother's window" (341). She watches her cousin's "savage trainings" and "bitter feuds" like a spy and is ready to attack them from the "vantage points" she is hiding

at. She envisions Lauralee's wedding as a "military wedding" (343). She sings war songs and dances to their music, dreaming that she is the conductor, the leader who persuades her allies that they will defeat their enemies. Just as her cousins have confined her to her female body, she wants to confine them to wheelchairs so that they will know what it feels like to be in a disabled body, feeling powerless and incompetent.

Not only does the masculine warfare terminology the narrator uses, but also her admiration for everything associated with masculinity, reveal explicitly Rhoda's desire to see herself as equal to men. She is fascinated by Lauralee because of her WAVE uniform, her Camel cigarettes, and her photograph that pictures her "leaning against the rail of a destroyer" (342). She admires her housekeeper, Baby Doll, because of her enormous, undefeatable stature that looked "as tall as a man," and her pin that read "pearl, then harbor" (340).

By assuming a masculine image like Lauralee and Baby Doll, she wants to determine her own actions and choices, rather than having them dictated to her. Like Dudley and her cousins, she wants to take responsibility, establish her own personal identity, and self-worth. In other words, very basically, she wants to grow up. This is evident when she firmly refuses to try on any dress from the "girls' department" and instead tries on dresses that make her look older and mature: "I admired myself in the mirror. It was almost perfect. I looked exactly like a nightclub singer" (344). At last, she decides on a black-watch recital dress which makes her look sophisticated, mature, and secure: "Little Miss sophisticate, it said. Sophisticate, that was the word I was looking for" (345). It doesn't matter whether she looks like a nightclub singer or a sophisticated, elegant woman, as long as both enable her to cast aside her child image. Her desire to grow up is also evident in her remarks about wanting to be a lawyer who saves people from the electric chair. In a way, she wants to show her grandmother and Lauralee that she is old enough to understand the concepts of death, justice, and the protection of rights. At the reception following Lauralee's wedding, she remarks about the tediousness of "eating cakes" and "letting people hug her," two activities typically associated with children. On the other hand, she prefers preparing herself a "grown-up drink" from different bottles, presumably a cocktail with plenty of "crème de menthe" (346) and crushed ice.

However, Rhoda realizes that she will never grow up if she can't prove to herself that she is brave, strong, and masculine as any man. Thus, she decides

to leave the party and walks toward the Broad Jump Pit. By leaving the house at night and alone, she violates one of the most important rules imposed on her by her grandmother. However, it becomes a matter of principle, a risk worth attempting to establish a definition of her 'self.' Thus, for Rhoda, the Broad Jump Pit begins to take on a more profound significance, as it becomes a place where her honor, principles, and personal boundaries are at stake. It not only represents a masculine-coded space but also becomes the implicit threshold for growing up. The Broad Jump Pit, then, is not just where the boys play—it is where they are permitted to enact and rehearse adulthood. For the female child, exclusion from this space signals not only her present marginalization but also a future foreclosed. To grow up as a girl, within this logic, is to remain confined—to be denied access to the very structures that produce agency. Her desire to participate is therefore not a simple act of imitation, but a gesture toward inclusion in the very process of becoming a whole, self-determining subject.

Consequently, the "Broad Jump Pit" begins to symbolize the rejection of authority and the adaptation of a masculine identity in a female body. It does not only represent physical freedom anymore, but also represents for Rhoda the chance to transgress the boundaries of the symbolic order: "I do not know how long I was out there, running up and down the cinder path, thrusting my body further and further through space, tossing myself into the pit like a mussel shell thrown across the bayou" (347). Her body becomes her instrument of protest against her feminine positioning and identification. By jumping over the pit, she proves that she is as strong and as masculine as her male counterparts and thus frees herself from the imprisoning role that society has imposed on her – the role of a fragile girl in need of protection. She has gone over the "barrier" and is now ready to confront whatever awaits her:

> I hoisted the pole up to my shoulders and began to run down the path, running into the light from the moon. I picked up speed, thrust the pole into the cup, and threw myself into the sky, into the still Delta night. I sailed up and was clear and over the barrier.
>
> I let go of the pole and began my fall, which seemed to last a long, long time. It was like falling through clear water. I

> dropped into the sawdust and lay very still, waiting for them to reach me.
>
> Sometimes I think whatever has happened since has been of no genuine interest to me. (344)

The ending of the story reveals the lasting impact of a singular moment when the ten-year-old narrator experiences a form of freedom, power, and self-definition that was previously denied to her. For a brief instant, she challenges the naturalized exclusions of male-dominated spaces by allowing her body to do what it can and become. Her landing, which she likens to *"*falling through clear water,*"* brings into mind the "image of baptism" (Bauer 55) that marks the beginning of a radical awareness of her own capability. Nevertheless, as Bauer also indicates, the story's final note complicates this triumph. The suggestion that nothing since has matched the significance of that summer hints that maybe this was the last time Rhoda experienced or will experience such a liberated sense of freedom. Rhoda may have flown to the skies that night, but the world she returns to remains unchanged—proud in its hierarchies, untouched in its exclusions. What Rhoda glimpses midair is not just freedom, but its cost: that to soar, she must momentarily leave behind the girl she is allowed to be. "Revenge," then, ends not in triumph, but in clarity—a fleeting ascent followed by the quiet gravity of knowing that flight, for girls, is rarely sustained.

Butler's *Parable* Series: Reimagining Female Agency through Community

Speculative fiction becomes a powerful space for envisioning alternative futures and exposing the failures of the present. Writers like Octavia E. Butler use the genre as a radical site to question issues of race, gender, and power. In her *Parable* series, Butler not only imagines a world plagued by scarcity, violence, and moral collapse, but also depicts strong, dark-skinned female protagonists in pursuit of survival, purpose, and transformation. Survival depends not on brute force or divine submission, but on an individual's ability to adapt, anticipate, and ultimately shape change. 2024, the fictional Los Angeles suburb of Robledo, which The Parable of Sowers (the first novel of the Parable series)

is set in, depicts a "Hobbesian state of nature" (Curtis 153; Stillman 19) where violence, anarchism, and lawlessness has reached its peak because of the lack of any operative law or order in society. Federal and local governments exist only in name to collect taxes (298), and police and government officials who steal, bribe, and enslave are more dangerous than mob gangs (288). People live in walled communities to protect themselves from the surrounding dangers of theft, murder, mutilation and rape. Scavenging has become a customary ploy for the homeless, the maggots, while torching has turned into a hedonistic and addictive pleasure for the Paints, teenagers who do anything to buy illegal drugs that "make watching a fire better than sex" (51). Natural resources, which are vital for sustaining life, like fresh water and arable land, are scarce, resulting in hunger, death, and epidemic diseases. While most homes lack any type of communication network, such as TVs or radios, guns and rifles have become indispensable domestic commodities, replacing the costly law enforcement agencies that only a small segment of society can afford. America's perennial dilemma of race still exists, but because the majority of the population is living at the margins, underprivileged, uneducated, and in poor health, unable to subsist, whether black, white, or Hispanic, the primary focus is on survival. The drive for survival in a world where there is no longer a governmental authority to rely on produces not only a sprawl of walled communities of 'us' and 'them' but also the domination of multinational corporations that promise protection and safety from the violence "outside" through debt slavery. By purchasing and running formerly self-sufficient towns and turning them into "militarized privatopias" (Phillips 306), these multinational corporations serve as fortresses that buy out people's freedom.

Amid such instability and chaos, where the drive for survival has led to a predatory individualism, Octavia Butler depicts an African-American heroine who challenges the oppressive practices of the dominant power structure with her new life philosophy, Earthseed. Lauren Olamina, the young African-American protagonist and founder of the Earthseed religion, emerges as a figure of radical female autonomy within a violent, collapsing world. Her mantra, "God is Change," subverts traditional hierarchies of power and authorship by reconfiguring divinity as a mutable force shaped by human agency:

> A victim of God may,
>
> Through learning adaptation,

Become a partner of God,

A victim of God may,

Forethought and planning,

Become a shaper of god.

Or a victim of God may,

Through shortsightedness and fear,

Remain God's victim,

God's plaything,

God's prey.

God is Change (Sower 31)

The philosophy founded on Laura's unique Earthseed religion centers around the dialectical relationship between the individual and his/her changing world. Her *Book of the Living*, which considers "God as Change" and "man as agency," considers life as a flux of change and the individual as its potential "victim", "partner," or "shaper." The tenets of change require from each and every individual the flexibility to adapt, the foresight to plan and evaluate, and the power to shape. Thus, according to Olamina, in order to survive and adapt to "change," the individual must evolve like their natural habitat. His teachers are all around him, training him to cope with change. What he "perceives" and "experiences" are invaluable as his losses and gains (257). Civilization teaches him to bond, to share his information, experience, and creativity with others so that "ongoing adaptability" can be achieved. (Talents 67). The two-fold quality of nature teaches him that convergence and divergence stand side by side; "growing" from "one to many" is as important as "dissolving" from "many to one" (Sowers 287). With her hyperempathetic syndrome, a genetic disorder that causes her to feel the sufferings of others, Olamina herself actually becomes the embodiment of such incongruities. For while her hyper empathetic syndrome on one hand unites her with others, making her share their pains and agonies, it also stigmatizes her, making difference a leading influence in her life. Thus, with her composite figure that blends individualism with collectivism, cultural diversity with pluralism, she becomes the personification of her religion that advocates a rejection of the ossified present for the construction of an embracing

yet individualistic future. By spreading the tenets of her religion to others, she aims to transform people's mindsets from one of compliance and inertia to one of self-mastery, renewal, and interconnectedness.

After the traumatic experience of seeing her neighborhood destroyed and her family raped and murdered by drug-addicted Paints, Laura Ola Olamina is ever more determined to spread the gospels of Earthseed. The torching of Olamina's gated community functions like a Phoenix fire that leads to her transformation and rebirth:

> In order to rise
>
> From its own ashes
>
> A Phoenix
>
> First
>
> Must
>
> Burn (Sowers 141, Talents 260)

Her journal entry that recounts the horrible details of her family and friends' murder opens up with the above epigrammatic quotation taken from her Earthseed religion. Significantly, Olamina chooses to view the extinction of her entire community through the lens of this tantalizing ancient myth. By devoting three separate lines to highlight the words first, must, and burn, Olamina, rather than focusing on the issue of resurrection, which the myth is commonly associated with, prefers to lay emphasis on its prerequisite, the condition necessary for its fulfillment. The Phoenix parable, which she considers one of the most "apt" but "disturbing" teachings of her Earthseed religion (Talents 260), correlates renewal with ultimate destruction, emphasizing the need to break all sorts of ties with the past for fresh new beginnings. In other words, for any rejuvenation to take place, there should be no past; only the present and the future. Thus, the loss of community and parents, though discomforting and painful, becomes crucial for Olamina's rite of passage. It does not leave Olamina susceptible to outside dangers; on the contrary, it serves as a cataclysmic Change that instills in her the regenerative power to embark on

a new beginning. Like the "fortunate fall" of Adam, that transforms the initial harmony into a relationship of strife and struggle, Olamina's fall casts her out from her secure reality, her "cul de sac" (Sowers 52), and plunges her into the world of the "living":

> A tree
>
> Cannot grow
>
> In its parents' shadow (Sowers 76)

Akin to the phoenix, Olamina's self-generative power stems from her ability to liberate herself from the past and start completely anew. In this respect, she resonates with the Adamic individual of Emerson and R.W.B. Lewis, who "emancipated from history, bereft of ancestry... self-reliant and self-propelling" is "ready to confront whatever await[s]. . . him with the aid of his own unique and inherent resources" (Lewis 5). Pondering about the plants "that seed themselves. windborne, animalborne, waterborne, far from their parent plants" (Sowers 71), she realizes her destiny. She sees herself as well as the rest of humanity as "Earthseeds" that can seed themselves to distant extraterrestrial worlds without being dependent on the "umbilical cord" of Mother Earth:

> I suspect that a living world might be easier for us to adapt and live on without a long, expensive umbilical to Earth. Easier but not easy. Still, that's something, because I don't think there could be a multi-light-year umbilical. I think people who traveled to extrasolar worlds would be on their own –far from politicians and business people, failing economies and tortured ecologies –and far from help. Well out of the shadow of their parent world. (Sowers 77)

Olamina becomes the weaver of her own "life philosophy" and learns to "shape self" by "create[ing} its own reasons for being (21). Emerson's imperative that "each age . . .must write its own books" (American Scholar 26) finds its equivalent in Olamina's criticism of her "dying, denying, back-ward looking" people that expect to survive by electing presidents like Christopher Donner who promise to return them "back to the glory, wealth, and order of the twentieth century" (Sowers 20):

> '. [Donner's] like a symbol of the past for us to hold on as we're pushed into the future. He's nothing. No substance. But having him there, the latest in a two-and-a-half-century-long line of American presidents, feels like the country, the culture they grew up with, is still here –that we'll get through these bad times and back to normal.
>
> . . ..
>
> . . .But things have changed a lot, and they will change more. Things are always changing. This is just one of the big jumps instead of the little step-by-step changes that are easier to take. People have changed the climate of the world. Now they are waiting for the good old days to come back.' (Sowers 53-54).

Conversely, if progress is to continue, if the world is to avoid an apocalypse, it is crucial that not only a New Zion be discovered but also a new principle of governance be instituted, since the older systems have only cultivated ruin and decay. Neither a nostalgic return to the good old days nor a naive denial of reality can save modern man from the impending environmental, economic, and social collapse. His "convenience, profit, and inertia" (Talents 8) has transformed this vast continent into a dying ecosystem. Even the millennial-old Redwood trees that are "resistant to disease, fire, and climate change" (62) are in danger of vanishing.

Acorn, the small community that Olamina builds on the outskirts of society, after the ultimate destruction of her community, articulates Olamina's moral vision of how an ideal society ought to be. The collective deconditioning that she provides as the basis for political and social change rests on the ability of each individual to master their own destiny and become a "shaper" rather than a victim. However, Olamina's life philosophy does not sanction self-reliance on the grounds of solitude, "as the simple genuine self against the world," but on "collective solidarity." The members of her community move from the many to the one, paring away their racial, social, and cultural differences to survive in the anarchistic, predatory future of 2030s:

> Earthseed offered immediate rewards. Here was real community. Here was at least a semblance of security. Here was the comfort of ritual and routine and the emotional satisfaction of belonging to a 'team' that

stood together to meet challenge when challenge came. (Talents 63)

In Butler's futuristic world, communitarianism is not a moral idealism dedicated to transforming and perfecting human society through communal self-effort (as Confucius' communitarianism is), but rather a "better chance of surviving" (Sowers 195), a communal act whose practical consequences outweigh its moral ones. Her Earthseed philosophy serves as a hopeful experiment in reviving the morale and self-confidence of a people at the threshold of ruin and decay. Her idea of community functions as a grassroots impulse for meeting, in William Yancey's words, "exigencies of survival" (400). By preaching, teaching, and spreading the principles of Earthseed, individuals are "redirect[ed] . . . away from the chaos and destructiveness into which they have fallen toward a consuming' creative long-term goal" (Butler 412). In a way, her Acorn community reminds the reader of Ralph Barton Perry's famous definition of American collective individualism:

> American self-reliance is a plural collective self-reliance -not 'I can' but 'We can.' But it is still individualistic, a togetherness of several and not the isolation of one, or the absorption of all into a higher unity. The appropriate term is not 'organism' but 'organization' and ad hoc organization, extemporized to meet emergencies and multiple organizations in which the same individuals join many and surrender themselves to none. (13)

Perry's description of collective individualism as an "ad hoc extemporized to meet emergencies" runs parallel to Tocqueville's definition of American liberal individualism, in which individuals express "an enlightened regard for themselves [which] constantly prompts them to assist one another … Each American knows when to sacrifice some of his private interests to save the rest." Both definitions, which underline an "enlightened self-interest" as a dominating force behind social commitment and unification, serve as working models for Acorn and Olamina's other Earthseed communities:

> Beware:
>
> At war
>
> Or at peace,

More people die

Of unenlightened self-interest

Than any disease

However, the message that underlines salvation through communalism, through the appreciation of diversity, teamwork, and individual responsibility, is engulfed by a national discourse that yields itself to the realization of a "higher" destiny:

You are Earthseed –

One of many

One unique,

One small seed,

One great promise.

Tenacious of life,

Shaper of God,

Water, Fire,

Sculptor,

Clay

You are Earthseed!

And your Destiny,

The Destiny of Earthseed,

Is to take root

Among the stars.

The above quotation, which concludes with an overarching metaphor of "taking root among the stars," conceives Earthseed members as a consensual yet individualistic community organized around a shared sense of mission. The colonization of the stars becomes a participation in a people's destiny. Olamina, rather than tying her new order of governance to a particular institutional form, redefines it in a more spiritual context. The purpose of Earthseed is not to

improve the existing order by rectifying it, since it is a "dying world" (72) that individuals have to "seed [them]selves farther and farther" (72) away. The "rotting past" (73), with its primitive living conditions, competing corporate values, class and income inequalities, and racial and cultural intolerance, serves as an exhausted model of the past. Thus, the purpose of Earthseed is to arrange, using financing, education, and technological exploration, the organization of self-sufficient Earthseed communities that can provide for themselves in outer space:

> Granted, Earthseed was an unusual cult. It financed scientific exploration and inquiry, and technological creativity. It set up grade schools and eventually colleges, and offered full scholarships to poor but gifted students. The students who accepted had to agree to spend seven years teaching, practicing medicine, or otherwise using their skills to improve life in many Earthseed communities. Ultimately, the intent was to help the communities to launch themselves toward the stars and to live on the distant worlds they found circling those stars. (Talents 379)

In contrast to the religious tyranny exerted by the CA, Olamina's multi-racial community is structured on voluntary participation, shared responsibility, and racial tolerance. Through her efforts to spread Earthseed, Olamina aims to shift her community's orientation away from passivity and toward a dynamic ethic of self-transformation and mutual responsibility. Her mission is not salvation, but adaptation; not domination, but survival through shared evolution. In doing so, she challenges both the atomized individualism of American cultural myth and the institutional paralysis of traditional faith. What emerges is a radically reimagined model of female autonomy—one that is relational rather than oppositional, expansive rather than contained.

The Earthseed verse— "You are Earthseed… And your Destiny… is to take root among the stars"—encapsulates not merely a spiritual mantra, but a radical declaration of autonomy. In Lauren Olamina's voice, the metaphor of seeding oneself across the stars becomes a powerful image of female agency: to uproot oneself from historical decay, to refuse confinement to a dying world, and to imagine new forms of living beyond inherited limitations.

Butler, true to the speculative mode, constructs a narrative terrain where women's resistance is not bound by existing institutions or gender roles but redefined through acts of vision, care, and leadership. Olamina's mission is neither nostalgic nor restorative—it is generative. She builds Earthseed communities not through domination but through the cultivation of shared survival, education, and moral direction. Olamina's site of exile, or in Heidegger's term, unheimlich (unhousedness), produces a more liberal self-centered on self-autonomy, self-mastery, and Adamic renewal and regeneration. The absence of a fixed institutional structure enables her to weave autonomy into a spiritual and social framework where women are not punished for leadership but are instead empowered by it. In a genre that allows for the imaginative projection of new realities, Butler renders Olamina as a shaper of God, of destiny, of community, whose agency is not derivative but self-authored, rooted not in conquest but in continuity and resilience. Autonomy becomes a commitment to act in accordance with deeply held beliefs, even when such convictions isolate, endanger, or unsettle. And resistance becomes a way of insisting on meaning in a world structured to deny it. In this context, female autonomy emerges not as a tragic defiance but as a viable female vision of community.

4
CONCLUSION:
CENTURIES APART BUT THE SAME STORY

The American imagination rests on a promise—that its institutions exist to protect the foundational ideals of the American Creed, among which individualism stands as its most celebrated and enduring value. However, when those ideals come into contact with the realities of gender, the promise fractures. A girl raised on the stories of the American Dream and the self-made man learns to believe in boundless possibilities, only to find that the moment her ambitions venture beyond the socially sanctioned roles of nurturer or caregiver, those dreams are subtly or overtly discouraged. Consequently, American individualism turns into a double-edged sword for many women; it inspires them to dream, while systematically denying them the tools to realize those dreams. The ethos of individualism-the freedom to choose, to speak, to shape one's life, so foundational to the American sense of self—becomes for many women conditional and strictly regulated. Frequently reminded that their personal goals and choices will influence the lives of those around them, women often experience an internal dilemma, trying to find a balance between the dominant, masculine vision of self-sufficiency and success and the values of attachment and care they are informed with. In effect, the American female self is asked to embody two contradictory selves: the independent individualist celebrated by American culture, and the self-effacing "woman-mother" demanded by tradition.

It is precisely within this tension between promise and expectation that women's autonomy is interrogated—and reimagined in American women's

writing. The six stories discussed in this book reveal the compromises, hidden refusals, and subtle acts of self-making that their heroines undergo, offering a compelling lens through which to understand the complexities of the American female experience. Across these texts, a striking shared insight emerges: that women's individualism is not a journey toward self-definition but rather a winding path that involves intricate tensions, struggles, and compromises.

The two stories "The Yellow Wallpaper" and *The Awakening* hold a mirror to the illusion of women's autonomy by laying bare its fatal costs. If living autonomously requires, as Marilyn Friedman has poignantly pointed out, "to have a significant array of opportunities to act in ways that reflect what deeply matters" (Autonomy 13), then the fictional worlds of neither heroine provide the social context nor the options for its realization. Both protagonists, crushed under the weight of emotions and desires considered too unruly and incompatible with their roles as wife and mother, turn inward toward self-erasure. In "The Yellow Wallpaper," the narrator, subjected to the pressures of her physician husband and societal norms, yields to the rest cure —a symbolic lobotomy accelerated by her husband's dual role as both her physician and primary caretaker. Denied the opportunity to heal herself through writing, she descends into madness, creating an alternate personality as a means of escape. Unable to give decisions about her own body and mind, and unable to express herself with pen and paper, the narrator turns instead to the wallpaper, projecting her suppressed thoughts and unspoken fears onto its chaotic pattern. Her imagination becomes the only available medium through which she can write—figuratively inscribing her story onto the walls that imprison her. In doing so, she not only channels her repressed voice but also becomes a witness to the silent suffering of the countless women trapped behind the wallpaper. If she cannot speak for herself, she at least speaks for them. This act transforms madness into a kind of authorship—distorted, desperate, but defiantly expressive. At the very end, she writes her final note, her last inscription, not on paper, but on her own body, and begins to 'creep openly'—transforming her silenced existence into a visible act of self-determination, a defiant authorship in the only language patriarchy has left her. Her 'creeping' becomes a disruptive force, unsettling not only her husband but also the broader patriarchal order that sought to control her. Her husband's collapse suggests that 'true horror' lies not in madness but in the rejection of the imposed feminine ideal.

The theme of suppressed individualism finds a more extreme, though equally poignant, expression in Kate Chopin's *The Awakening*. Chopin's heroine delivers the most radical response: existential surrender. The "indescribable oppression" that emerges due to not being able to identify with the "woman-mothers" on the Creole island drives Edna Pontellier to a profound sense of alienation. A disconnection not only from her environment but from the very roles that define acceptable womanhood. As she drifts further from traditional expectations, her actions become increasingly bold, reflecting an urgent need to claim a life shaped by her own desires. In the end, the ocean, which symbolizes both her awakening and her yearning for freedom, becomes the stage for her ultimate escape. Ultimately, Edna's journey becomes a search to live by her own moral logic, as a woman outside socially sanctioned codes of femininity. But in a world where the freedom to define oneself is offered conditionally, the cost of self-assertion may be unbearable.

In both stories, "The Yellow Wallpaper" and *The Awakening,* the promise of self-determination proves to be futile, not because the heroines fail to claim it, but because it was never truly offered to them in the first place. With no social or emotional support, they turn to self-erasure. Their self-annihilating resolutions underscore the complexity of female self-determination, revealing that moral autonomy is not simply a matter of personal will, but also of whether one's environment can support and sustain that autonomy. Consequently, the ideal of individualism in both stories functions not as a path to self-fulfillment, but as an illusion—one that traps rather than liberates.

In contrast, "A New England Nun" and "Janus" portray women facing the same lack of freedom but responding differently. Their heroines manage to assert control over their lives within the limited spaces allotted to them—one turns her home into a self-fashioned sanctuary, imprinting her presence on every corner, while the other projects her desires onto an object to cope with the profound loneliness within her marriage. Both stories are not stories of open rebellion, but of quiet strategy. The autonomy they gain is partial, and the loneliness they accept is the price they pay. Louisa in "A New England Nun" does not openly rebel or attempt to break free from her environment; yet, she quietly chooses a life apart. Her routines, her silence, and her solitude become a kind of shelter. She does not seek marriage or connection, but instead remains in the world she knows best. She finds peace there, even if it comes at the cost

of isolation. Her sense of self, shaped more by habit than intention, by protocol than passion, leaves her unable to imagine a life beyond the quiet contours of domestic order. By preserving what feels safe — her home, her routines, her quiet way of being — she upholds an instinctive form of self-governance, one she may not fully appreciate or understand but that benefits her. Andrea, the protagonist of "Janus," like Louisa, also forgoes deep emotional entanglements, sacrificing passion and fulfillment for security and control. The bowl—like Andrea's carefully maintained life is not merely decorative but symbolic: it conceals as much as it reveals. Its smooth, flawless surface mirrors Andrea's external composure, yet its history suggests an underlying complexity and emotional contradiction. A gift from a former lover, the bowl sits prominently in her home, a concealed double she cannot fully acknowledge, even to herself; a quiet doppelgänger that resists definition as wife, partner, or lover. In this sense, her Janus-like condition leads to a response shaped by dual awareness: not a choice between roles, but a quiet refusal of all. She chooses, quietly, to step outside them—accepting a half-formed existence: unfinished, unfulfilled, but her own. The bowl tells her she doesn't need anyone — it is perfect in its incompleteness, being "cut in half, deep and smoothly empty" (599). Like her, it holds space for what cannot yet be named.

In both stories, "The New England Nun" and "Janus," autonomy isn't just about freedom from control, but about actively engaging with what matters to the self, and shaping life around it. They can be read as stories about the private realms of the female self that protect rather than expose the self. The female self is neither erased nor suppressed—it is shaped, guarded, and maintained through the protagonists' own desires, commitments, and values. To see Louisa as reclusive or Andrea as unfaithful is to undervalue the struggle and inward transformation that define their autonomy. For 'containment' in both stories becomes a self-empowering act, consciously embraced to preserve a space of freedom. While Louisa is hardly aware of the freedom her home offers her, Andrea, as a working woman, is fully conscious of the benefits it provides. Just as domestic rituals give meaning to Louisa's life, for Andrea, the bowl—onto which she projects her success and hidden self—is equally valuable. It reminds us that for many women, the freedom to be oneself remains a private, fragile achievement, hidden not out of shame, but safeguarded in silence. Consequently, despite being written nearly a century apart, these

two works reveal a striking continuity. They reveal that female autonomy hinges on concealment, compromise, and carefully protected spaces. Whether unconsciously or consciously shaped, whether within the quiet walls of a New England home or beneath the polished surface of a modern marriage, whether centered in domestic routines or professional success, the female self must often be 'hidden,' if it is to endure.

In "Revenge" and *The Parable* series, the response becomes more declarative, no longer confined to quiet defiance or subtle negotiation, but shaped through overt acts of resistance. In "Revenge," Gilchrist's child protagonist recognizes in a very early age that to be a "real" subject, she has to prove herself in the male-dominated space of sports and adventure. Rhoda's yearning to enter that space is not an act of mimicry, but a conscious denial of the bodily and behavioral expectations associated with her gender. Gilchrist's narrative, then, is not merely about a girl matching the boys in strength or determination; it is about a child "who begins to understand—however unconsciously—that entry into the world of adulthood, that access to power, belonging, and recognition is conditional on her ability to adopt a masculine-coded identity. Rhoda's courage and resilience are not born merely from a defiant spirit eager to compete with the boys—though that certainly plays a role—but more profoundly from an intuitive sense that her self-worth cannot—and should not—be contingent on the validations or boundaries set by a male-dominated world. In claiming a place in a world that implicitly excludes her, she carves out her own space of individualism, not only in material terms—through action and rivalry—but also in moral terms, by asserting a self she refuses to compromise.

In the *Parable* series, Butler's heroine Lauren Olamina builds an entirely new system of belief and community to protect and expand human possibility. From a priest's daughter to an articulate cult leader who contributes to the remaking of others, Olamina, in pursuit of her own "life course," epitomizes the American myth of the self-made man of the Frontier. Her Earthseed philosophy, a religious "calling" that underlines salvation through communalism, is enveloped by a national discourse that advocates moving forward in time and "taking root among the stars" (Sowers 71) as its ultimate destiny, an "errand" into an extraterrestrial wilderness. By taking on the role of 'pioneering' as her defining national mission and by sowing the seeds of her religious philosophy along Highway 101, Olamina prescribes to an individualistic model of self-

creation, which foregrounds self-mastery, independence, and mobility as the norm. Furthermore, as the builder of an all-embracing Earthseed culture that serves as a substitute for the 2020s fascistic political party, Christian America, Butler's heroine stands as a panacea to the increasingly xenophobic, intolerant, and anarchistic futuristic world of 2020s America. She plays an integral role in the molding of a unifying collective identity that embraces diversity, change, and adaptability as the source of constant renewal.

Across the women's narratives explored in this study, one thing becomes clear: for many women, the ideal of individualism is not a simple goal, but a response to the necessity of preserving women's intrinsic worth, even in the face of overwhelming obstacles. It is not something they can fully accept or easily reject. It is a dilemma they are forced to respond to, each in their own way. Moreover, how they respond—whether by retreating, adapting, resisting, or rebuilding—reveals that autonomy, for them, is not a matter of standing alone. It is about protecting a part of themselves. Sometimes that means building a life in secret. Sometimes it means starting over. Moreover, sometimes, more painfully, it means vanishing. It is not an act of escape but an exercise of choice. But in every case, it means facing the ideal of individualism not as a truth, but as a challenge.

From Gilman's "The Yellow Wallpaper" to Butler's *Parable* series, the various responses of the female self, ranging from quiet endurance to political resistance, reveal not a singular path to autonomy but a spectrum of tensions shaped by inner convictions, lived experience, and cultural expectations. They should be read as acts of resistance, each in their own way; some quiet, some unyielding; some self-destructive, some self-preserving. However, each ultimately emerges as a response to the double bind of American individualism, marking a turning point in the lives of these women characters as they lay claim to autonomy on their own terms.

Ultimately, what emerges from these women's writings is not the image of the atomistic, self-made individual, but rather that of women who redefine strength through endurance, autonomy through relation, and identity through the difficult work of adaptation. In this light, women's writing in America does more than reflect the tensions between autonomy and conformity—it reimagines a female vision of individualism, where women are challenged to build their own moral frameworks while managing the complexities of female

existence. This female vision invites us to reconsider what it means to live, not by transcending the world, but by remaining deeply within it. After all, not every revolution needs a battle cry—sometimes, it just needs a woman closing a door, keeping a bowl, or planting a seed.

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