

## The Art of Madness

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The nineteenth century was not an entirely kind time for the female artist. Coming of age as the 1800's bridged into its latter half, literary artists Elizabeth Stuart Phelps Ward, Charlotte Perkins Gilman, and Kate Chopin were all well aware of their uncharitable culture. Equipped with firm feminist bents and creative visions, each of three women produced a seminal work – *The Story of Avis*, “The Yellow Wallpaper,” and *The Awakening*, respectively – taking that atmosphere to task. In these stories, each of the three women produces a female protagonist who struggles for having been born simultaneously an artist and a woman. The writers pit their women's desires against the restrictive latitude of their time and show how such conditions drive women to madness, as a result of which they are forced to either escape into the blind mind of insanity or deal daily with their pain and inescapable societal condemnation. In an age where “hysteria” was a frequent hit in the vernacular, Phelps, Gilman and Chopin use art and literature as mediums to show that, indeed, there is a method behind the madness.

To begin with, nineteenth century artists of any genital persuasion faced either impossible or elitist expectations. Art should be done for its own sake, critics huffed, *not* for the sake of a pocket book. To sell your art is to sell your soul, to forever exclude yourself from the title of “maker” because you groveled to the term “market.” Naomi Sofer points out that there is ample evidence for this attitude in the rampant discussions of the time of “originality, which was lauded as the defining characteristic of high art and yet regarded as vulnerable to technological developments”(33). Artists were expected to keep up and compete with the times somehow without coming into contact with the times' forward

march. Art was to be a pure endeavor, unbesmirched by any ambition not revealed within a picture frame. Even non-artists of Phelps's time recognized this obstacle. The author of "Gail Hamilton's Criticism" writes in her 1878 review for *The Women's Journal of The Story of Avis* that "It is understood that no man can pursue an ordinary business life and attain any degree of perfection in Art; why then expect it of a woman?" (277). The author states the conflict as a sort of limit on ability; if a man – or a woman – must devote his or her attention to something other than Art, especially if that something is the constant ruckus of business, then he or she must take from the time and energy that would have been Art's to give it to that other focus. In order to give to one, a person must take from the other. In the competition for livelihood, success is a zero sum game. In his essay "Literature as Art which appeared in the December 1867 edition of *The Atlantic Monthly*, the pinnacle authority at that time on art and culture, Thomas Higginson pits the aesthetic pursuit of art against all other practical pursuits. He even frames the idea of creating art for its own sake versus producing art for the sake of materialistic needs as some sort of division of spiritual purity. Phrasing his argument in words much like those the Bible uses when speaking about earthly wealth, Higginson writes, "Every man's aim must either be riches, or something better than riches" (745). Needless to say, this general assumption about the validity of art and its proper context made it rather difficult for male artists of the starving rather than the inheriting variety who *needed* to sell the work of their hands to keep their hands working. In order to keep feeding the soul of society, they needed to feed themselves first. If men wanted to be considered true artists, they needed to have riches already that they could live off of. Sponsors, patrons, inheritances, a wife to keep all affairs besides art in

order – these were the real tools of successful artists. Bread-winner or beauty-maker, men had to choose one. They could not be both.

And then there were the women. Alongside the general expectation that true art should not be an economic venture was the dual pressure of general societal scoffing at the idea of a career woman, let alone a female artist. Women were to be wives and mothers, not enterprising individuals or master artists. The latter were conceived of as entirely male archetypes; the former, the only expected female stereotypes.

This frame of mind evidences itself again and again in *The Story of Avis*. For example, in her opening pages, Phelps presents the town University, the center not just of artistic venture but of all higher callings, as a resource composed of entirely and “only men – at Harmouth: indeed, the University existed, [Avis] supposed, for the glorification of men” (8). The explicit rejection of women from the artistic pursuit is very clear in the condemnation Avis receives from her father when she tells him of her wish to follow that path. The man, ruffled and irked, casts off his daughter’s request by spitting that he “can’t have [her] filling [her] head with any of these womanish apings of a man’s affairs” (33). Phelps herself wrote on her time’s general disapproval of female autonomy in the political and business spheres. In her essay for *The Independent* in 1871, *The True Woman*, she rails against the limitations that her contemporaries were expected to accept.

“The ‘true woman,’ we are told, desires and seeks no noisy political existence. To the ‘true woman’ the whirr and bustle of public life are unattractive. A ‘true woman’ honors the homely virtues and appreciates the quiet dignities of household life” (269).

But it is clear from the start that *Avis* is built for those “noisy” affairs. The protagonist is an artist to her core. Her nature is not somehow juxtaposed to the requirements of an artists, but rather it is most fully expressed in them. When Avis does finally go off to study art, Phelps describes Avis’s self-application by saying the young girl “abandoned herself to the grating drudgeries involved in mastering the *technique* of art with a passion of which it were not discerning not to say that it added to the fire of the artist something of feminine self-abnegation” (37). Avis’s womanliness is not an obstacle but a blessing to her practice. This makes sense, given that Phelps presents Avis as a figure for the embodiment of art *in a woman*. She describes the girl again and again as if she were a piece of great art herself. In one instance, Avis “looked slender and shining as a Doric column” (49). Elsewhere, she turns “like a statue on its pivot” (99). Not only is Avis a “deft-handed, undomestic girl,” she is what is made by deft, undomestic hands (77). Avis is not just an artist. She is art. Creating is not just a career for Avis; it is her very way of life. It is who she is. It is the fullest expression of her personality. Avis’s artistry is inherent to her nature, and it is this integration that ultimately allows her to survive whole.

Beside Avis stand the female protagonists of Gilman’s “The Yellow Wallpaper” and Chopin’s *The Awakening*. While Gilman assigns no moniker to her first-person protagonist (who shall henceforth be known as YWN for “Yellow Wallpaper Narrator”), she still assigns her artistry. In contrast to Avis and Edna (Chopin’s protagonist), YWN is more aligned with her author in that she crafts words, rather than matter. She is a literary, rather than a visual artist. Unless, that is, one considers her destruction of the wallpaper acts of art, the outbursts of a creator who wishes she had a more tangible medium to work with. In either case, whether solely a wordcrafter or a worker of visual media as well, it is clear that she is

an artist all the same, though it can be harder to pick out the representations of YWN as such, as they are given in a much more negative context than the one in which Avis and Edna are described. YWN has no sympathetic third person voice, no more direct authorial overtone to lay out her attributes. Instead, she has but her own societally trained mind and the verbal lashes of her husband. So, instead of being described as imaginative” or sensitive, YWN only relates how her husband tells her she has “silly fancies” (49). Beyond further disparagement from YWN’s husband, the woman’s artistry is left completely to speak for itself. YWN’s literary leanings subtly show themselves as her perennial desire to write of her experience. Her mental creativity is made plain in YWN’s writing itself. She is no whitebread writer. No, her writing twists and turns and tumbles across pages as remarkably as the torn wallpaper that YWN describes. Note, for example, how YWN points out that wallpaper is not just “yellow,” but “a dull lurid orange in some places, a sickly sulphur tint in others” (43). In the same passage, she floridly describes other eccentricities of the wallpaper, noting “when you follow the lame uncertain curves for a little distance they suddenly commit suicide – plunge off at outrageous angles, destroy themselves in unheard of contradictions” (43). From the narration of YWN, it is clear that she has both an artist’s eyes and an artist’s words.

Stunted a bit, perhaps, beside Avis and YWN is Edna, the protagonist of Chopin’s *The Awakening* who is characterized more by her struggle to fully realize herself as an artist. Readers first meet Edna as a vaguely bored, capricious housewife of society’s upper echelon. In the very first interaction that readers see of Edna with her husband, it becomes immediately apparent that there is a brighter nature latent in Edna that longs to burgeon but has as of yet has only wilted away under Mr. Pontellier’s lackluster responses to Edna’s

attempts at creativity. Edna has the premature makings of an artist within her. Readers hear early descriptions of the woman that speak of how “Mrs. Pontellier had brought her sketching materials [on the trip], which she sometimes dabbled with in an unprofessional way. She liked the dabbling. She felt in it satisfaction of a kind which no other employment afforded her” (40). Further on, the narrator mentions again Edna’s “natural aptitude” for painting (40). Clearly, Edna is host to an inherent artistic temperament and skill that might have allowed her to become a professional artist if they had been at all realized; that is, if such a thing had ever even been a consideration for a young country girl or a rich woman of sophistication.

However, as Edna remains submerged in the sensual Creole culture, she reaches a tipping point of artistic sensibility, and is thrust over its climax upon hearing Mlle Reisz’s playing of Chopin. “Musical strains, well rendered,” readers are told, “had a way of evoking pictures in [Edna’s] mind” (55). The inundation of artistic inspiration from Mlle Reisz’s well-rendered musical strains on the piano, paired with the physical sensation of freedom from her first real venture into the ocean stir the artistry within her. “How strange and awful it seemed to stand under the naked sky! how delicious! She felt,” readers are told of Edna’s transformational experience, “like some new-born creature, opening its eyes in a familiar world that it had never known” (146). No longer asleep to the sensations of a creative life, Edna spends the rest of the novel trying to find more and more of this sensual and, as we shall see, sexual world that she had never known.

A world that none of these three female protagonists had or could ever know.

At least, not in their time.

And that, *that* is where their struggle begins.

These women artists were held back not only by the “anti-expectation” that they would become artists, but also by the assumption that they would not have careers *at all*. Women of their time were not to be movers and shakers and business-makers. They were to be *housewives*. Ladies with calling cards, interior decorators with domestic intuition, wives completely devoted to the ministration of their husband and mothers completely devoted to the care of their children; these were the activities that women were to engage in, whether they would have themselves chosen to or not.

And whether such activities would prove to be professionally or personally detrimental. Avis herself recognizes that she must make a choice in life: artistic freedom or domestic chains. Avis explains that her “ideals of art are those with which marriage is perfectly incompatible. Success – for a woman – means absolute surrender, in whatever direction. Whether she paints a picture, or loves a man, there is no division of labor possible in her economy” (69). Avis is well aware that if she submits to one aspect of domesticity (accepting the title of wife) then she must submit to all of it. “Marriage,” Avis tries to explain to Ostrander “as if she were but recognizing some dreary, universal truth, like that of sin, or misery, or death,” Phelps goes on, “is a profession to a woman. And I have my work; I have my work!” (71) Much later, Avis cries out again against the domestic condemnation that would absorb her talent to put it to use only on darning and picking out curtains. “But I have my work,” she protests again, “and I have my life. I was not made to yield these to any man. I was not made to absorb them in his work and his life” (107). Falling in love, getting married, having children – these things may have been the assumed fulfillment of the nineteenth century woman, but they were the obliteration of the nineteenth century woman artist. Sofer notes that in writing Avis, Phelps herself was aware

of this condemnation to obliteration and asserts by the structure of her narrative that such a fate, such a failure “result[s] from a complex web of social and economic forces that label talented and ambitious women exceptional, to their detriment, and conspire to contain women's artistic ambitions by transforming their creative work into domestic labor” (37).

This sacrifice of the soul, as such it is, appears again in the fates of YWN and Edna. In the opening pages of the “The Yellow Wallpaper,” Gilman makes it clear that the narrator is *not* the most comfortable of mothers. “It is fortunate Mary is so good with the baby,” YWN jitters on. “Such a dear baby! And yet I *cannot* be with him, it makes me so nervous” (44). While YWN is lucky enough to have a nanny to whom she can hand off childcare, she still cannot escape the belittlement of her preferences and emotions under her title as wife. As noted before, YWN receives not only disapproval but also disparagement when she lets out any bit of her inner imagination. “John laughs at me, of course,” she writes in her journal, “but one expects that in marriage” (41). YWN is so scared of revealing any part of her that is not wife or mother that she restricts her self-expression to *solely* within her journal entries. “I would not say it to a living soul, of course,” she writes one day, “but this is dead paper and a great relief to my mind” (41).

YWN suffers further as an artistic temperament condemned not only to societal silence but also to personal silence. Her inner turmoil is brushed off as mere “womanly hysterics,” as were any and near all mental health conditions women suffered at that time. YWN tells:

“[I 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.



[...]

I did write for a while in spite of them; but it does exhaust me a good deal

– having to be so sly about it, or else meet with heavy opposition” (42).

YWN is constricted to do art not only how but also *when* men feel is appropriate. She is robbed of all outer agency. And so, deprived of any external means of being a real person, she turns inward.

She goes mad.

Faced with the torment of remaining aware while carrying out a role for which she is not suited for the rest of her life or fleeing farther and farther into herself and her art, YWN chooses the latter. Of course, it is not a conscious choice, but it is what happens nonetheless.

Bombarded with external cues, verbal and otherwise, telling her that she must become something she cannot, YWN is simultaneously left with no other network of support or sympathy. She is isolated. YWN herself remarks that “it is so discouraging not to have any advice and companionship about my work” (46). YWN faces the double quarantine of the lack of societal conception of the “female artist” and the specific solitude of the nineteenth century “rest cure.” Not only can YWN not interact with others as an artist, she really cannot interact with anyone at all. This includes her child. Her infant boy is so much associated with YWN’s having been yoked to a man and forced to take on a life for which she was not suited that being around the child becomes downright repugnant to YWN. She is uneasy around him. He makes her nervous. Consequently, she avoids handling her babe, handing him off to the nurse as much as is possible. Alas, the murmured nursery rhymes and on-the-spot lullabies will be no resource for YWN. She is devoid of satisfying

human interaction, whether it be with the two males in her life or with another woman. So, left with no animate outlet for her mind to chatter with, it turns to the only thing left for it to identify with: the inanimate.

In this case, the yellow wallpaper.

It begins as a sort of abstract identification with the paper that not even YWN herself really notices she is doing. Returning to YWN's early description of the wallpaper as a "dull yet lurid orange in some places, a sickly sulphur tint in others" (43); this very well could be a description of YWN's depression as well. At times, it manifests as a dull, lurid sense of painful boredom; at others, as a sickly, noxious desperation. As her depression deepens, rather than aligning her suicidal thoughts with her own body, YWN reads them into the patterns on the wallpaper. There is an early description of "a recurrent spot where the pattern lolls like a broken neck and two bulbous eyes stare at you upside down" (46). The description mirrors eerily the sight of someone hanged. YWN also writes that "when you follow the lame uncertain curves for a little distance they suddenly commit suicide – plunge off at outrageous angles, destroying themselves in unheard of contradictions" (43). In other words, the curves follow the fate of female artists. These are women who may try to travail for a little while, tottering lamely forward for a bit, only to fail in the end. They cannot manage the paradoxes that society has put forth for them – art or business, professional success or personal cloister. Women who decided to pursue the already taboo career of artist were expected to somehow do it all, but they could not. And so in their attempts to do so they, like the tears in the wallpaper, only end up "destroying themselves in unheard of contradictions." YWN knows this, if not on an explicit level. And so she describes them, the curves, figuratively. They are there, all around her, stand-ins for female

artistry, stuck in the society plastered about them and plunging into oblivion, just as YWN progressively plunges deeper into madness.

As YWN's depression deepens and her mind sinks further into the confusion of mood swings, the descriptions of the wallpaper too become more anomalous. "Looked at in one way," YWN writes of the patterns in the paper, each breadth stands alone, the bloated curves and flourishes – a kind of "debased Romanesque" with *delirium tremens* – go waddling up and down in isolated columns of fatuity" (48). The marks in the paper, like the growing marks of madness in herself, are described in terms of idiocy and nonsense, shaking and illness and dysfunction, a kind of nonsensical broiling that matches the depression and the feelings she would logically be having a suppressed artist. Later in the passage YWN continues that the way the pattern repeats "adds wonderfully to the confusion" (48).

As time goes on, YWN begins to use the yellow wallpaper as a more explicit medium to hold her artistic and personal thoughts and endeavors.

"It is stripped off – the paper – in great patches all around the head of my bed," YWN writes, "about as far as I can reach, and in a great place on the other side of the room low down. I never saw a worse paper in my life. One of those sprawling flamboyant patterns committing every artistic sin" (43).

While it has not yet been made clear at this point in the narrative, *YWN herself* is the one pulling off the wallpaper, perhaps as a way of asserting the artist in herself? The wallpaper is the only medium that YWN has for any kind of artistic expression or preference. She is aesthetically offended by the pattern on the wallpaper, and so she takes

it down. Where there was substance, she leaves barrenness. Where there was preexisting aesthetic decision, she inserts artistic agency.

As her isolation continues, her depression tightens and her grasp on reality loosens, and YWN begins identifying more explicitly with the wallpaper. The paper takes on more life; YWN herself remarks at it. "I never saw so much expression in an inanimate thing before," she writes, "and we all know how much expression they have!" (46). The wallpaper becomes a potential stand in for so many things (YWN's inescapable depression, the introspection of her growing insanity, the never-ending expectation of the societal audience...) Consequently YWN's emotions even begin to interact with the wallpaper. She notes that she "get[s] positively angry with the impertinence of it and the everlastingness. Up and down and sideways the crawl, and those absurd, unblinking eyes are everywhere" (46).

YWN's externalization of her emotions through animating the wallpaper makes sense in the context of her artistic temperament; earlier in her journal, she shares how the propensity of her mind to make up stories has always found fodder in, for example, plain drywall. "I used to lie awake as a child," she writes, "and get more entertainment and terror out of blank walls and plain furniture than most children could find in a toy-store" (46). It's a rather logical asylum, then, for her artist's brain to seek, this personality within paper.

As YWN's sanity does flee farther and father behind that paper, her perception of the wallpaper moves beyond anthropomorphic to downright anthropological. The wallpaper is no longer a mere metaphor for YWN. It is YWN. "Behind that outside pattern," she writes, "the dim shapes get clearer every day. It is always the same shape, only very numerous. And it is like a woman stooping down and creeping about behind that pattern"

(50). YWN, once a woman sneaking about and writing clandestinely about her feelings towards the wallpaper, becomes a woman so integrated with the source of her art, her writing, that she becomes a woman *in* the wallpaper. Unable to see herself as an individual in the world, YWN flees more and more into a figment of her madness hidden behind the art itself.

And it is very clear that the “woman in the wallpaper” is meant to be a reflection of YWN herself. “The faint figure behind,” she writes one day, “seemed to shake the pattern, just as if she wanted to get out” (50). And later, “And she is all the time trying to climb through. But nobody could climb through that pattern – it strangles so” (55). The shadow woman is bound by the constraints of her environment, Just as she cannot escape from behind the wall of art held up against her, she cannot escape from behind the societal expectations pinning her down as a hysterical woman in bed. Furthermore, YWN’s sanity cannot escape from its internal depression and external suppression.

Left with no real treatment for the angst that gnaws away at her soul, YWN eventually flings her consciousness entirely into a figment of reality. YWN lets her mind flee into a world of its own making. The woman in the wallpaper becomes her reality – and she brings that woman out.

“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.

[...] there are so many of those creeping women, and they creep so fast.

I wonder if they all come out of that wall-paper as I did?” (56-58)

YWN abandons reality for a madness that will at least allow her to be one with her art. Yes, she may be “crazy,” but in her craziness there is a sort of freedom. “I’ve got out at last,” she cackles at her husband, “in spite of you and Jane. And I’ve pulled off most of the paper, so you can’t put me back!” (58) Rather than trade her soul for respectability, YWN trades her sanity for relief. She may only live in a world inside her head, but at least her art is there and is *her*, and at least she lives.

Edna, on the other hand, does not quite manage that outcome. After the first breath of her artistic awakening at Grand Isle, Edna becomes increasingly aware of a force in herself that she cannot satisfy. Even just hours after her night swim, Edna notices her resistance flaring.

“She perceived that her will had blazed up, stubborn and resistant. She could not at that moment have done other than denied and resisted. She wondered if her husband had ever spoken to her like that before, and if she had submitted to his command. Of course she had; she remembered that she had. But she could not realize why or how she should have yielded, feeling as she then did” (60-61).

With clearer eyes to perceive herself more distinctly, Edna also perceives her individuality and sensuality and their former suppression more distinctly. She wonders why she should consent to be the woman thus far expected of her, thus far obediently played. Awake to yearnings of her artistic temperament, Edna is awake to its repulsions, too. Resistance to the stereotype expected of her is no longer an incomprehensibility to her. “No longer,” Chopin writes of her developing protagonist, “was she content to ‘feed on opinion’ when her own soul had invited her” (125). No longer is Edna content to let an

outside hand shape her when she has learned of the muscles and mind residing in her own fingertips.

However, Edna, like YWN is thus an oddity. As a married woman, Edna has no equal for comparison or precedent or support. For Edna, there is only Mlle Reisz, a spinster who can afford a reputation for eccentricity and strong-headedness because she has no yoke of man or child upon her. She is attached to no other individual to whose direction society would expect her to submit. She can do as she pleases and as long as she is willing to keep only herself as constant company has but internal consequences to bear up against. Her personal life is hers.

Edna, on the other hand, has no such freedom. A high-class wife with children, albeit children she can pass off to the care of a governess, Edna is expected to mold her life around her family, not around some spinsterial quirk. Mlle Reisz's state in life is too dissimilar from Edna's for her to find any direction in it. Edna cannot act like Mlle Reisz, because she is not like her. This distance from her sole source of sympathy only adds to the sense of isolation that has taken root along with Edna's burgeoning independence. Edna may finally feel herself an individual, but she also feels alone.

Edna's loneliness only increases when Robert goes away. In Robert, Edna had an outlet for both her artistic and her sexual desires. He was an admirer. He gave her a reason for whimsy. He was both audience and consort, if only just. When Robert leaves, Edna loses the sense of identity she had created as an artist and a woman through her relationship with this not-quite-lover. Chopin writes, "Robert's going had some way taken the brightness, the color, the meaning out of everything. The conditions of her life were in no way changed, but her whole existence was dulled" (75). Deprived of the only soul that

seemed to bolster hers in its independence, robbed of the only societal license she had allowing her a greater extent of personal freedom, caprice, emotion, movement, Edna in her isolation, like YWN, fades into depression.

Or rather, a worsening depression. Very early in the narrative it is clear that Edna already suffers from some kind of emotional and mental malady. "She could not have told why she was crying," Chopin explains of one of Edna's tearful outbursts. "Such experiences as the foregoing were not uncommon in her married life. [...] An indescribable oppression, which seemed to generate in some unfamiliar part of her consciousness, filled her whole being with a vague anguish. It was like a shadow, like a mist passing across her soul's summer day. It was strange and unfamiliar; it was a mood" (35).

As Edna becomes more and more familiar with that formerly sleeping part of her consciousness, the bit of her mind that wishes to be an independent creator rather than someone else's belonging, so her moods intensify in frequency and depth. Edna's sense of art-making and the world she can never fully do it in becomes increasingly frenetic, increasingly desperate.

"There were days when she was very happy without knowing why. [...] Then there were days when she was unhappy, she did not know why – when it did not seem worth while to be glad or sorry, to be alive or dead; when life appeared to her like a grotesque pandemonium and humanity like worms struggling blindly toward inevitable annihilation" (88).

Edna tries to break free from this sense of futility by creating some independent purpose for herself. Her first feint is to try to separate from her husband. Having long since cut ties with him emotionally, she tries to create a physical break, too. She moves out.



“Instinct had prompted her to put away her husband’s bounty in casting off her allegiance,” Chopin explains. “[S]he had resolved never again to belong to another than herself” (110). In moving to a flat of her own, Edna is trying to find an appropriate way to assert her independence. She attempts to create a space that is wholly hers; hers to decorate, hers to fill with people, hers to make a space of art and love and sex.

But society and economics will not have it thus. Edna has not divorced from her husband, nor has she turned away completely from his attempts at contact – or from his wallet. Edna’s flight becomes a kind of silly wifely fit in the eyes of her husband, her societal peers, even herself. She is unhappy with having achieved only the motions of an independent endeavor. She knows she is not truly a fully realized artist just because she tried to take up residence elsewhere.

And so, Edna tries to realize her artistic temperament more fully. Like YWN, she searches for some external vessel to pour her soul into. And she finds it, at the source of her artistic and sexual epiphany – in the ocean.

The ocean is the only connection to her sexual awakening left for Edna to turn to. Edna cannot really keep up an affair nor leave her husband for a lover. She is clear that she will not set herself up to be treated like mere property changing hands. Consequently, Edna is doomed to a situation in which she can fully and freely neither make love nor make art, in which can never fully and freely make herself. Not having any other home for her soul, for the core of her artistry, in either person or location, having no real work to do that can fulfill her true nature and no real companion to give her soul sympathy, Edna rejects remaining alone and unfulfilled, forced by convention “into the soul’s slavery for the rest of her days” (146). She eludes it all, obliterating herself, leaving no remnant of the wife and

mother she was behind for her captors to grasp at. Edna returns to the sea, which she feels is reaching out to her, "inviting the soul to wander in abysses of solitude" (146). It was in the sea that Edna first felt herself to be a being capable of creating. It was in the sea that she first tasted power, freedom, escape from restriction, where it felt "as if some power of significant import had been given her soul" (57). It was in the sea that Edna first felt any desire for independent, remarkable enterprise. "She wanted to swim far out, where no woman had swum before," Chopin writes (57).

So, it is to that birthplace of her awakening that Edna returns to try to fully sublimate her artistic intentions with her death. Edna swims out, far out, so far out that she eventually can swim no longer and allows herself to drown. In the ocean, Edna succumbs to the "inevitable annihilation" she had found so dreadful before, but because by making the annihilation intentional, she tries to make it thus a piece of art. Her drowning is not a capture but a release, an escape of her soul onto the canvas that first suggested to her that perhaps she could make something of it.

As Edna drowns, she hallucinates. "She heard the barking of an old dog that was chained to the sycamore tree," Chopin writes. "The spurs of the cavalry officer clanged as he walked across the porch. There was the hum of bees, and the musky odor of pinks filled the air" (147). As she dies, Edna appears to be submerged in a fantasy of what her life might have been like, had she been allowed the romantic, artistic life that would have come of marrying that first of her lovers. Even the language itself that Chopin uses to write the passage is heavy and heady and highly artistic. Chopin is very much painting the scene. In a way, Chopin is almost giving readers a glimpse, a flash, of what sexual fantasy Edna might have imagined when indulging in more intimate moments with her body.

But alas, the fantasy is still only a figment. Edna's act of creation is also an act of ending. Her artistic temperament may go out with a bang, but it still goes out. Like YWN, Edna sacrifices her existence within reality for the sake of her art, managing only an incomplete realization of her agency as an artist.

Avis, on the other hand, fights to retain all of it. Phelps's protagonist comes up against all the same trials as her literary compatriots. She is born into a culture of pre-existing bias that says she first off cannot be an artist, and second cannot use her art as economic fodder without considering herself a sell-out. However, from the beginning, it is very clear that Avis is well aware of these constraints. Furthermore, she understands that such nay-saying will only get louder should she marry, but that should she choose spinsterdom, she might escape the worst of it. And so that is what Avis spends most of her formative years expecting to do: to grow old with her art and her dignity. Until Ostrander appears on the scene and throws a wrench in the whole plan, she was content with the path she had freely and voluntarily chosen.

"Sometimes," Phelps writes, "when [Avis] sat before her easel, forecasting her fair future, she felt suddenly glad, with a downright womanish thrill, that she was so sure of the beauty and patience of her purpose, that she was not to live a solitary life because no other had been open to her" (55).

Singleness was to be a choice happily made for her art and herself, not a condemnation of her nature thrust upon her by society. Avis knows that she is a different sort of woman and thus requires a different sort of existence. "The plain word is," she once

tries to explain to Ostrander, “that I do not, and must not, think of love, because the plain truth is, that I cannot accept the consequences of love as other women do” (68).

And yet... Avis’s heart in the end escapes the rule of her head. Fall in love she does, and consequences there are. As Avis’s relationship with Ostrander furthers, her sense of justification falters, and a despair, a depression takes hold. She wishes to love Ostrander and be good to him, but he is not as good to her in return. And so sets about the warring of Avis’s natures within her: the woman in love and the artist scorned. Instead of the certain, solid descriptions Phelps uses to describe Avis’s actions earlier in the novel, Phelps begins to use sharper, less stable phrases. For example, Phelps writes of one fit as “the irrational outcry of a creature rasped and wrung by the friction of her own nature upon itself” (106). Avis feels more and more as if she has started upon “a road which led to some undefined but imperative surrender of her nature” (101).

Does Avis follow the path of her other literary sisters? Does she crumble under the weight of wifhood and motherhood, turning inward or bursting ineffectually outward? Does she cave to insanity, to at least continue on in a friendlier imaginary world of her own, like YWN? Does she give herself up in one final act of independence to the nature and the Nature that had wrought her like Edna?

No. Avis allows herself her emotion, having always felt that she was to be allowed to have her feelings and her fancies, and then, after a grand hallucination or vision of sorts, realizes that this suppression, this grief, this irrecognition, could be a part of her work, of her art, too. Having always been more self-aware than the other protagonists ever were, Avis comes to understand her experience in life as a melding of womanhood with art.

First, she sees “pottery, porcelain, furniture, drapery, sculpture, then flowers, fruits – a medley of still-life, - swept through strange, half-revealed, but wholly resplendent interiors, which glided on indifferently, like languages that said, ‘What has though to do with us?’” (81).

This first part of Avis’s vision shows her artwork that is both old, and hence largely material historically covered by male artists, and associated with domesticity and housework. Neither, the vision reminds Avis, need be her focus. She need neither repeat the work of male predecessors nor confine herself to serving contemporaneous men.

Her vision then moves forward, presenting her with “for a long time [...] only the suffering of animals, an appalling vision of the especial anguish incident to dumb things. She saw the quiver of the deer under the teeth of the hound, the heart-throb of the pursued hare, the pathetic brow of a dying lioness, the reproach in the eye of a shot bird, a dog under vivisection, licking the hand that tore him” (83).

In other words, Avis sees the condition of women of her time. Women are perceived as animals to be caught and displayed and used for the service and pleasure of men. They are expected to be “dumb things,” never speaking of their trials or dissatisfaction. Later, Ostrander’s former lover presents this expectation even more directly. “That’s the worst part of being a woman,” she says. “What you go through can’t be told. It isn’t respectable for one woman to tell another what she has to bear” (164). Women are expected to take abuse while all the while serving and even flattering the men who are taking advantage of them. They are expected to lick the hand that supports them economically and socially. And they are expected to remain silent about it all, even to other women.

To go where no woman has ever gone before, then, Avis realizes, is to speak. Or if to not be quite so bold, to at least point to the reality that there at least *is* actually something that women *could* speak. To show the world that there is a hidden nature, a secret inside women that has not been seen or spoken of yet. For this task, Avis chooses the Sphinx.

The Sphinx is an ancient, feminine image traditionally associated with riddle and mystery. Avis claims the mythical creature as an avatar for all women. Phelps relates that “the mystery of womanhood stood before her, and said, ‘Speak for me’” (83). The Sphinx, in both its creation and its existence, is Avis’s statement for womankind. Sofer points out that “the Sphinx is female, silent, and the eternal object of men’s artistic vision; Avis’s mission is to make the Sphinx the speaking subject of her own art” (39). The idea of taking art and making it speak for the artist was not a strange concept to Phelps; she does so in other of her novels as well. Weinstein describes how for Phelps herself, writing the novel *The Gates Ajar* had “nothing effortless about [it...] whether it is the hard work of grief or the hard work of writing about it” (57). Weinstein again relates how literary critic “Nancy Schnog contextualizes the novel in relation to the consolation literature of the period and demonstrates how ‘Phelps used her protagonist’s private journal as her primary vehicle through which to examine the problematic binds and controls placed on female affect by nineteenth-century religious and social ideologies’” (60). Both of these quotes apply to the actions of Phelps’s protagonist in *The Story of Avis*. Painting the Sphinx is a work of grief for her, a work fueled by and depicting grief, a work meant to show the binds and controls – and the escape from them awaiting women – placed on her and her fellow nineteenth century females.

Avis's painting of the Sphinx is an act of revelation that creates rather than destroys. It externalizes her experience while simultaneously universalizing it and generating a larger context within which Avis can move. In painting the Sphinx, Avis shows a portion of herself, a portion of her inner nature to the world, rather than shutting her inner nature to that outer world. The Sphinx is an analog, not an avatar for her understanding of this other component of womanhood. Through the Sphinx, Avis produces a new sort of art. It is not the mere replica of older works produced by male artists. It is not merely a trope expected of women at the time. It is something entirely new, a craft that itself is evidence of another type of female nature society had yet to recognize.

Yes, Avis does fall, though. The Sphinx proves her one great work, as she dooms herself to mediocrity by allowing prints to be sold in order to support her family financially. With no patron or female financial support network, even if Avis does have examples of females who have felt like her across the spheres of society, she in the end has to stoop to seeing "the rent paid – Heaven help her! – out of that locked studio to whose cold and disused walls she should creep by and by with barren brain, and broken heart, and stiffened fingers" (199). In the end, Avis is still aware that she has "counted the cost of her marriage in the blood of her soul" (206).

While not exactly triumphant, Avis does at least emerge alive and sane from it all. She has not cast away her consciousness or her existence as a way of escaping her cultural chains, she remains stubborn within them. Even at the end of the book, Phelps presents Avis speaking with Coy, telling her friend yet again "But I [...] – I am nature too. Explain me, Coy" (249). With Avis, Phelps presents the sad compromise that allows women of her time to cling to the ragged vestiges of a disused passion. Avis, in order to remain an integrated,

aware person, must relegate her passion to the backburner, where it will grow cold and tasteless but at least not get thrown away. YWN, on the other hand, throws herself, her sanity, to keep her life and her art. Edna throws away her life in an attempt to assure she will never be forced to relinquish her art and herself.

Avis strikes a sad but self-preserving balance. But while Avis's fate is a regrettable one personally, there is still an undercurrent of distanced professional triumph. Avis may not have become the prolific artist she had hoped to be, but she did produce a seminal work that will persist on its own. In *Avis*, Phelps hints at the roots of a growing sector of women waiting to emerge from the underground and bloom within society. While Avis makes sacrifices, her provisions do not go to waste. With Avis's final request to Coy, Phelps "suggest[s] that having the support and mentoring of other women will enable female artists to take their rightful place among artists of both genders creating the nation's cultural future" (Sofer 41). Avis's Sphinx will speak yet. Abandoned to neither insanity nor death, the voice of the nineteenth century female artist was not yet lost.



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