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Navigating Identity Through Education in Literature and in the Classroom

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Navigating Identity Through Education in Literature and in the

Classroom

A Thesis by

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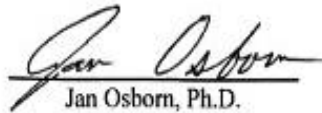


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ABSTRACT

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by Sofia S. Sakzlyan

This thesis explores the intricate relationship between education, identity formation, and oppression, drawing from psychosocial and sociocultural perspectives. I delve into how education serves as a critical arena where individuals encounter various internal psychological conflicts and external social influences that shape their sense of self. By analyzing the perspectives of writers such as Paulo Freire, bell hooks, Kate Chopin Charlotte Perkins Gilman, and Erin Gruwell, the thesis seeks to answer how education impacts the self and how it intersects with systems of oppression. Furthermore, I explore the role of education in fostering critical consciousness and empowerment, particularly in the face of oppressive structures that seek to marginalize individuals based on race, gender, sexuality, class, and ability. Through an analysis of these themes, I aim to illuminate the transformative potential of education in shaping individual identities and dismantling systemic inequalities.

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1 Introduction to the Self

“To educate as the practice of freedom is a way of teaching that anyone can learn.”-bell hooks

In the realm of education, individuals grapple with prevailing narratives that marginalize or obscure their lived experiences, influencing their sense of self and awareness. Education serves as a conduit for confronting these narratives and empowering individuals to develop critical consciousness. Additionally, it equips them with the tools to challenge oppressive systems, fostering unity among marginalized groups. However, disparities in access and quality of education often reinforce cycles of oppression, impeding individuals' journey towards authentic self-realization. Recognizing the interplay between education and identity within oppressive frameworks is crucial for devising methods to dismantle systemic injustices and cultivate inclusive educational environments.

However, before we begin to unpack how education plays a role in the shaping of our identities, let's define it. What is education? In the universal sense and according to “Oxford Languages”, it is “the process of receiving or giving systematic instruction, especially at a school or university.” But it is also defined as, “an enlightening experience”. These definitions capture the duality of education: it is both a formalized process of acquiring knowledge and skills within institutional settings and a broader, transformative journey of enlightenment and personal growth. When we consider the role of education in society, its impact on shaping individuals becomes evident. Education can be a powerful force for personal and societal transformation, providing individuals with the tools they need to navigate the world, critically analyze information, and

contribute meaningfully to their communities. It empowers individuals to pursue their goals, challenge societal norms, and advocate for social justice.

However, the influence of education is not always positive. In some cases, educational systems can perpetuate inequalities, reinforce existing power structures, and marginalize certain groups based on race, gender, class, or other factors. Access to quality education is often unequal, with oppressed communities facing barriers such as inadequate resources, discriminatory policies, and cultural biases. As a result, education can sometimes hinder rather than help the shaping of individual identities, increasing injustice and reinforcing social divisions.

To fully understand the impact of education on shaping individuals, it is essential to consider not only the formal teaching processes but also the broader socio-cultural contexts in which education occurs. In later chapters, we will explore the flaws of a formal and formulaic education system through the works of Freire and hooks.

We enter school at the young ages of 5 or 6 with *loud* aspirations and dreams. One will comment enthusiastically, “I want to be a doctor and save lives!” Others will use blocks that mimic buildings and confidently say, “I will build the tallest building when I grow up,” and others will write and draw in silence while their faces beam with inspiration. We express ourselves in different ways, and it is through education that we find the power and tools to make our childhood dreams come true.

Education plays a role in shaping one's sense of self by offering chances to address struggles and societal influences. By engaging in learning experiences, people embark on a journey of self-exploration and development while navigating settings, cultural norms, and roles. Education serves as an environment where individuals develop skills such as critical thinking,

collaboration, and communication and nurture their personal identity, molding their sense of self through psychological and sociocultural viewpoints.

The connection that the individual builds with the self is often overlooked. In the beginning stages of life, we, as individuals, depend on other humans for survival. Thus, that dependence creates a bond and familiarity where characteristics are drawn from each human. For instance, imagine a scenario where a person, let's call her Sarah, grows up in a close-knit family environment where mutual support and empathy are highly valued. Sarah's parents prioritize spending quality time together as a family, engaging in meaningful conversations, and offering emotional support to each other during both joyous and challenging times. In this family dynamic, Sarah learns the importance of compassion and cooperation from observing her parents' behavior and interactions with each other and with her. Through the dependence she develops on her family for emotional support and guidance, a strong bond forms, fostering a sense of security and belonging. As Sarah grows older, she extends these values and characteristics beyond her immediate family to her friendships. The dependence she initially had on her family for support gradually extends to her chosen friendships, creating a broader network of relationships that contribute to her sense of identity and personal growth. There is a transfer of personality traits, and we mold into our environment and those who surround it. As society undergoes transformations in culture, economics, and politics, personal values also undergo shifts to adapt to these changes. Gamage, Dehideniya, and Ekanayake argue that identity is a product of one's environment:

As a consequence of the constant transformation of society in terms of culture, economics and politics, value and value systems have been unusually changed and distorted. In favour of the same idea, Daniela et al. [2] justify this by arguing, “with modernity it is normal that personal value systems support changes to harmonize itself to current requirements.

Initially, some of the personal values may be determined by birth and later greatly influenced and molded by education, experiences, society, culture, and many other factors. (1)

However, the concept known as an “identity crisis” creeps in when individuals have the anxiety of a world unknown, of feeling uncomfortable in their skin, and the self-sabotaging and impulsive thoughts that everything is a falsehood. The demands of society and an individual's needs often collide, producing feelings of uncertainty, insecurity, and the desire to isolate. Baumeister, Shapire, and Tice argue the effects of an identity crisis:

The picture of parental ambivalence as a cause of identity crisis. In particular, Levi, Stierlin, and Savard (1972) report a sense of cases of sons' adolescent identity crisis. In these, typically, the father had conflicting feelings about the son, including envy and admiration, the desire for a protege, feeling that his own values were repudiated by the son... The mothers often offered support to and demanded appreciation from their sons in ways the sons rejected. Erikson's (1968) clinical observations are consistent with the picture of clinging, intrusive mothers and ambivalent fathers as causing identity deficit crises in sons. Psychoanalytic theorists (Falk, 1976, Schafer, 1973) suggest that the identity crisis is provoked by the son's ambivalence toward the parents, especially his fear of his own regressive desires to merge with them. (410)

In this context, the influence of family dynamics intersects with societal pressures, contributing to an individual's struggle to reconcile their personal identity with external expectations. The internal conflicts and anxieties experienced during an identity crisis reflect the impact of both family relationships and broader societal forces such as school, work, and friends on shaping one's sense of self.

The concept of identity is intricately tied to the individual's internal struggles in the face of societal demands and constraints. In Sigmund Freud's *Civilization and Its Discontents*, Freud explores the tension between the demands of civilization and the innate, often conflicting, instincts of the individual. The concept of identity is shaped by the interplay between the individual's internal drives (the id) and the external forces of society, morality, and cultural norms. Freud argues that civilization imposes restrictions on instinctual desires for the sake of social order and cohesion. This process, known as the "discontents" of civilization, leads to a conflict between the individual's desires and the demands of society. Developing a stable identity becomes challenging as the individual navigates between conforming to societal expectations and expressing their innermost instincts.

Freud introduces the idea of the ego, the rational and realistic part of the psyche that mediates between the impulsive id and the external world. The formation of the ego is central to the development of identity within the constraints of civilization. Therefore, the individual's identity is a complex interplay of internal drives, societal demands, and the adaptive functions of the ego. With so many layers to the self, parts discovered and undiscovered, it is challenging to decipher which parts feel authentic and which parts feel fabricated by the influences of society. Individuals struggle every day to find their "true self," and it is through *that* struggle and dedication that reveals the authentic self. Struggling often leads to personal growth as individuals confront challenges, learn from experiences, and adapt. Now that we have grasped the basics of identity, let us continue to see it play it out through two different perspectives: Sociocultural and psychosocial.

The sociocultural perspective, as applied to identity, underscores the connection between an individual and their social environment. Rooted in the works of scholars like Gee, Holland, and Lave, this perspective rejects the notion of identity as a singular entity and instead portrays it as

almost a mosaic structure of combined identities. As summarized by Verhoven, Poorthuis, and Volman,

People are thought to develop a range of self-understandings, for example as a science student (a science identity), a reader (literacy identity), or a music student (a musical identity). On a more general level, people are thought to integrate these self-understandings into a learner identity, a student identity (the person one is in school, not exclusively concerning who one is as a learner), and a social identity (one's societal position in terms of superiority and inferiority). (40)

The sociocultural viewpoint emphasizes that individuals shape their identities by engaging in social and cultural settings. Whether at home, school, or work, people participate in conversations and discussions that offer identity roles or social positions. These roles may involve qualities such as creativity, ambition, or teamwork. They change as individuals interact with and contribute to their surroundings. This interactive and socially influenced process underscores the nature of identity, which is constantly influenced by connections and cultural factors.

In essence, the sociocultural perspective emphasizes the interconnectedness of identity with the broader social fabric. Identity is seen as a product of social engagement, shaped by the roles and positions made available in different contexts. This perspective encourages a nuanced understanding of individual identity development, recognizing the rich influences that contribute to the complex mosaic of who we are.

The sociocultural perspective and the psychosocial perspective offer distinct lenses through which identity formation is understood. Erik Erikson's psychosocial perspective posits that identity development occurs through a series of psychosocial crises, each corresponding to a specific stage of life. These crises involve resolving conflicts between opposing psychological forces, such as

trust versus mistrust or intimacy versus isolation. In Hyewon Park's research, "Learning Identity: A Sociocultural Perspective," he claims that the primary concern in Erikson's definition of identity is "the choices individuals make in response to sociocultural, historical, and institutional actualities. He defines identity as "a process 'located' in the core of the individual and yet also in the core of his communal culture...conscious sense of individual uniqueness... and unconscious striving for a continuity of experience...solidarity with a group's ideals" (2). In contrast, the sociocultural perspective, championed by scholars like Gee, Holland, and Lave, diverges by emphasizing the role of sociocultural contexts in shaping identity. Rather than a predetermined set of crises, "identity is viewed as a dynamic, socially constructed process influenced by an individual's participation in various societal environments".

The psychosocial viewpoint stresses the struggles and resolutions that shape one's sense of self focusing on personal psychological development and adjustment. In comparison the sociocultural perspective examines factors emphasizing how social interactions, cultural surroundings and various roles, in settings influence the formation of identity. While the psychosocial approach centers on the individual, the sociocultural outlook widens its lens to consider the backdrop as a significant element in molding identity.

Transitioning from these perspectives on identity development, it becomes evident that education plays a crucial role in shaping individuals' identities from both psychosocial and sociocultural standpoints. Education serves as a primary base where individuals interact with various internal psychological conflicts and external social influences that contribute to their sense of self. Through educational experiences, individuals not only develop cognitive skills and acquire knowledge but also navigate social interactions, cultural expectations, and roles within different contexts.

Hence, the argument is as follows: I will begin by exploring the intricate relationship between education, identity formation, and oppression, drawing from psychosocial and sociocultural perspectives. The argument lies in the idea that education serves as a sphere where individuals weave themselves through different settings and net-worth on the grounds of internal psychological conflicts and external social influences that shape their sense of self. Through educational experiences, individuals not only develop cognitive skills and acquire knowledge but also navigate social interactions, cultural expectations, and roles within different contexts. By analyzing the perspectives of writers such as Freire, hooks, Gilman, Chopin, and Gruwell, the thesis seeks to answer how education impacts the self and how it intersects with systems of oppression. Furthermore, in the face of oppressive structures that seek to cage and deprecate individuals based on race, gender, sexuality, class, and ability, the role of education can help foster critical consciousness and empower those who are stuck in this inescapable limbo of oppression. Through an exploration of these themes, the thesis aims to illuminate the transformative potential of education in shaping individual identities and dismantling systemic inequalities.

2 Identity and Education

The psychosocial viewpoint and the sociocultural perspective provide frameworks for understanding education and its impact on forming one's identity. The psychosocial perspective based on Erik Erikson's theory, highlights the struggles and stages of development that people go through throughout their lives. When applied to education, this perspective suggests that effectively dealing with challenges like industry versus inferiority in childhood, or identity versus role confusion in adolescence, significantly influences an individual's educational self perception. It focuses on growth and how a person's perception of competence, self image and educational values evolve over time.

From another angle, the sociocultural viewpoint, advocated by scholars such as Gee, Holland and Lave emphasizes the significance of environments like family, school and community in shaping an individual's identity. According to this standpoint, education is viewed not as a journey but as a socially constructed and culturally influenced experience. The development of identity is perceived as an outcome of an individual's engagement in diverse sociocultural settings, where various identity roles are presented through social interactions and discussions. Verhoeven, Poorthuis, and Volman state: “some sociocultural scholars examine identities as narratives. The primary interest of these scholars is in the *self-understandings* people share, for example in interviews, and how these self-understandings are informed by people’s experiences with tools, norms, values, and identity positions in the school context” (41). The sociocultural outlook acknowledges that educational identity is shaped not only by mental processes but also by the surrounding social and cultural contexts within which learning occurs.

Oppression poses a formidable barrier to the formation and expression of individual identity, stifling the authentic self-expression of those subjected to its weight. In the face of

oppressive systems, individuals often find themselves marginalized, silenced, and stripped of agency, as societal norms and structures impose rigid expectations and limitations based on factors such as race, gender, sexuality, class, and ability. The constant pressure to conform to dominant narratives and stereotypes not only erases the complexity and diversity of human experiences but also denies individuals the opportunity to explore and embrace their true selves.

In societies marked by various forms of oppression, such as systemic racism, sexism, classism, or colonialism, education serves as both a tool for liberation and a battleground for identity formation. Through education, individuals confront dominant narratives that seek to marginalize or erase their experiences, allowing them to cultivate a sense of self-awareness and critical consciousness. However, it is important to note that not all education is liberatory. The dominant narratives in certain classrooms prevails when discussion is hindered, when instructors use students as outlets for depositing information; we will expand on this idea later on in this chapter.

Education provides the skills and knowledge necessary to challenge oppressive structures, fostering collective action and solidarity among marginalized communities. However, the accessibility and quality of education are often unequal, perpetuating cycles of oppression and hindering individuals' ability to fully realize their identities. Therefore, understanding the intricate relationship between education and identity within oppressive contexts is essential for developing strategies to dismantle systemic inequalities and cultivate inclusive learning environments where all individuals can thrive.

The connection between education and identity in contexts of oppression is illuminated through the idea that education not only shapes individuals' understanding of themselves and the world but also empowers them to resist and overcome oppressive systems. Through education,

individuals can assert their agency, reclaim *the self* and foster resilience against oppressive forces.

Paulo Freire, a prominent Brazilian educator and philosopher, takes his experience in the field of education and explores its many dimensions through a framework of oppression in his groundbreaking work *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*. Freire argued that traditional education, which he termed "banking education" perpetuates oppression by treating students as passive recipients of knowledge deposited by the teacher. "Education thus becomes an act of depositing, in which the students are the depositories and the teacher is the depositor...This is the banking concept of education, in which the scope of action allowed to the students extends only as far as receiving" (45). In this model, students are not encouraged to critically engage with the material or to challenge the status quo. Instead, they are conditioned to accept and reproduce existing power structures, reinforcing their own subjugation. Freire suggests an 'open system' where discussion and critical thinking is analyzed in an open space, accessible to everyone and all backgrounds. Education cannot pick and choose its audience. However, this approach to education is inaccessible within the confines of the traditional classroom setting, where every facet of the educational process is meticulously structured, orchestrated, and to some degree, regulated. While this conventional method is indispensable for imparting certain deemed information, its rigid framework contradicts Freire's vision of freedom in education. By inherently imposing constraints on the openness of learning, it hinders the potential of each learner, setting predefined limits from the beginning. According to Freire, the key to addressing oppression in education lies in adopting a pedagogy of liberation, which he termed "critical pedagogy." This approach emphasizes dialogue, critical thinking, and participatory learning, empowering students to critically analyze their social reality and to work towards transformative action. Freire believed

that education should not be a tool of domination but rather a means of liberation, enabling individuals to understand and challenge oppressive systems and to actively participate in the creation of a more just society.

Paulo Freire's philosophy on education transcends mere instruction; it delves deep into the realm of identity formation. Central to his pedagogical approach is the concept of conscientização, or critical consciousness, which empowers individuals to critically analyze their social reality and take action to transform it. In Freire's view, education is not just about acquiring knowledge; it is about understanding the world and one's place within it. By engaging in dialogue and reflection, learners come to recognize the social, political, and economic forces that shape their identities and experiences.

Freire's emphasis on dialogue as a pillar of education fosters a sense of mutual respect and understanding among learners, allowing them to explore and articulate their own identities within the context of broader societal structures. For instance, through my own personal experience as an instructor, the timid exterior of college students entering a discussion based classroom is rooted in the daunting misconception of their role within a classroom. Their involvement and participation begin to shift when a foundation of 'openness' is laid out. They become active participants in their learning rather than allowing the fear of being judged by the instructor or their peers to overrule this experience. Rather than passively receiving information, students *should be* and *are* encouraged to actively engage with the material, drawing connections between their personal experiences and larger systems of oppression and privilege. Not only does this practice of reflection and collaboration enhance students' self-awareness, but it also nurtures their compassion and unity with individuals facing diverse forms of adversity.

Freire's pedagogy challenges traditional notions of authority in the classroom, advocating for a more egalitarian relationship between teachers and students. Rather than seeing teachers as sources of information to be absorbed by passive students, Freire emphasizes the importance of jointly constructing knowledge through conversation and collaboration. This egalitarian approach allows students to assert their agency and voice, shaping their own educational experiences and identities in the process. By prioritizing the perspectives and experiences of learners, Freire's educational approach empowers individuals to reaffirm their identities and actively engage in fostering justice and liberation.

Adopting Freire's pedagogy not only revolutionizes the dynamics within the classroom but also extends its influence beyond academic spheres. By challenging traditional authoritarian structures and emphasizing collaboration and dialogue, Freire's strategy creates an environment where students actively shape their learning journey. This transformative process also impacts how individuals form their identity, empowering them to take control and express their viewpoints. By putting learners' experiences and voices at the forefront, Freire's teaching style sparks a shift in critical thinking, turning education into a tool for understanding the root of oppression and advocating for justice and equality.

3 Feminism and Education

As Freire's pedagogical principles make way into educational spaces, they intersect with broader social movements seeking to dismantle hierarchical structures and empower marginalized voices, a perspective expanded upon by bell hooks in her work *Teaching to Transgress*. In hooks' analysis, education becomes a site of resistance against oppression, where critical consciousness and dialogue serve as tools for liberation. Drawing on her experiences as a feminist educator, hooks emphasizes the impact of education in challenging oppressive systems and amplifying marginalized voices. She advocates for an approach that's inclusive and intersectional, recognizing and addressing the interconnected nature of different forms of oppression by prioritizing the perspectives and narratives of women of color.

The evolution of feminism serves as a pertinent example of this intersectionality, with each wave reflecting shifting paradigms of gender equality and liberation. From the foundational battles for basic rights in first-wave feminism to the inclusive and diverse ethos of third-wave feminism, the movement has continually adapted to address intersecting forms of oppression. This trajectory mirrors Freire's emphasis on collaborative knowledge creation and the amplification of diverse perspectives, illustrating how educational philosophies can align with broader social justice endeavors. By integrating hooks' ideas into discussions of feminist movements and literary analysis, a more nuanced understanding of the transformative potential of education in challenging oppression emerges, highlighting its pivotal role in fostering liberation and social justice. Through the lens of Freire's pedagogy and feminist discourse, these texts offer profound insights into the complexities of individual liberation and the interplay between education, identity, and social change.

What does it mean to be a feminist? Feminism and feminist ideology has changed throughout the years, progressing through waves broken up into three parts:

First-wave feminism, propelled by Wollstonecraft's arguments for women's education, focused on establishing women's rights, such as the right to own property and the right to vote, officially recognized in the United Kingdom partly in 1918 and fully in 1928, and in the United States in 1920. Second-wave feminism defined itself along a broader cultural agenda, beginning in the 1960s...focused on a sense of sisterhood and shared identity among all women...Third-wave feminism objected to second-wave feminism as essentialist and sought instead to build a feminism that focused more on the variety of women, making a point of including women of all races and building coalitions across racial and national boundaries. (Parker 186-187)

This interconnectedness extends to literary works such as Kate Chopin's *The Awakening* and Charlotte Perkins Gilman's "The Yellow Wallpaper," both of which grapple with themes of agency, identity, and societal constraints.

In *The Awakening* and "The Yellow Wallpaper," education plays a significant role in shaping the experiences and perceptions of the central female characters. In *The Awakening*, Edna Pontellier, the protagonist, grapples with societal expectations and norms, particularly regarding women's roles and autonomy. Despite her privileged background, Edna's education has primarily been within the confines of traditional societal values, which limits her understanding of her own desires and ambitions. However, as the narrative unfolds, Edna's awakening to her own identity is deeply intertwined with her pursuit of knowledge and self-awareness. Through her interactions with unconventional characters and exposure to new ideas, Edna's education

serves as a catalyst for her liberation and pursuit of personal fulfillment, albeit at great personal cost.

Similarly, in "The Yellow Wallpaper," the protagonist, known only as the narrator, is subjected to a form of oppressive "rest cure" prescribed by her husband, John, who is also a physician. Confined to a room with barred windows and stripped of any intellectual or creative stimulation, the narrator's education becomes stifled, exacerbating her mental distress. As she becomes increasingly obsessed with the wallpaper in her room, her confinement becomes a metaphor for the broader societal constraints placed upon women during the time period. Through her confinement, the narrator's education transforms into a journey of self-discovery and rebellion against patriarchal norms, ultimately leading to her descent into madness. In both works, education serves as a double-edged sword, capable of both empowering and constraining the female protagonists. According to Alajlan and Aljohani, "Both characters rejected being subordinate and oppressed and formed a reaction against it. Moreover, both authors used their profession to write about women's suffering within the patriarchal society and successfully negated the patriarchal norms"(6). Through their respective journeys, Chopin and Gilman critique the limitations placed upon women's education and self-expression within patriarchal societies, highlighting the transformative power of knowledge and self-awareness in the pursuit of autonomy and liberation. The characters in Chopin's and Gilman's works do not receive the 'traditional' and formal education that one considers when hearing the term, *education*. Their environment and the people they associate with make them question their identity and their roles within society. The protagonists' education, though informal and primarily introspective, leads her to challenge the patriarchal structures that confine her. Their *awareness* of who they are and the purpose they serve comes to the surface as they break free

from the societal expectations and ideologies that have thus far hindered their growth and formation of *the self*.

It is important to understand where feminism began because the true definition was lost in translation throughout the years. Feminism was and is not about hating men, it is hating the system they support. The patriarchy places men on a pedestal and molds them into dominant and controlling figures in the lives of their wives and daughters. The feminist movement aimed to give women equal rights and a place in society that valued a woman's opinion and thought. Therefore, in an attempt to better understand feminism, we take figures such as Charlotte Gilman and Kate Chopin, whose works inspire and motivate their generation and the following generations to come about women's struggle to attain happiness and liberation from a society that so effortlessly stripped women of their passions and identities. Hannah Howard in her work, "Realizing their Positions in the Universe as Human Beings: Exploring the Writings of Kate Chopin and Charlotte Perkins Gilman in Relation to the American Women's Movement of the Late Nineteenth Century," provides context:

The 1800s was not a favorable era for women because it was filled with oppression, inequality, emotional abuse, and lack of freedom. Charlotte Perkins Gilman and Kate Chopin demonstrate the paradox of women's suffering due to unpleasant social confinement caused by male vanity and ego. From 1870 to 1935, women strived towards and accomplished great achievements in these areas; however, the same women who fought for women's education, suffrage, and social reform were those whose social status kept them contained in a separate sphere from men...American women's advancement between 1870-1935 in Knoxville, Tennessee and its surrounding areas serve as an interesting microcosm of comparison to the national movements. Against this backdrop

Kate Chopin and Charlotte Perkins Gilman's writings provide a barometer for historical comparison. Although Gilman was much more politically active than Chopin, both wrote innovative pieces that sought to advance women as equal humans in America near the turn of the twentieth century.

These stories depict the rejection of traditional values due to the forced nature of submission under men. "The Yellow Wallpaper" and *The Awakening* represent a woman's struggle to gain independence, freedom, and respect without relinquishing one's identity to the societal traditions of motherhood and domesticity.

"The Yellow Wallpaper" is loosely based on Charlotte Gilman's personal life and her struggle with constant severe nervous breakdowns and the rest-cure. In an article she wrote called, "Why I Wrote 'The Yellow Wallpaper'", Gilman comments about her illness and the treatments she endured by physician's order:

For many years I suffered from a severe and continuous nervous breakdown tending to melancholia—and beyond. During about the third year of this trouble I went, in devout faith and some faint stir of hope, to a noted specialist in nervous diseases, the best known in the country. This wise man put me to bed and applied the rest cure, to which a still-good physique responded so promptly that he concluded there was nothing much the matter with me, and sent me home with solemn advice to "live as domestic a life as far as possible," to "have but two hours' intellectual life a day," and "never to touch pen, brush, or pencil again" as long as I lived. This was in 1887. I went home and obeyed those directions for some three months, and came so near the borderline of utter mental ruin that I could see over.

Gilman realized that with the “rest cure” came isolation, and with isolation came madness. It was through this realization that Gilman was able to write “The Yellow Wallpaper”. The story’s narrator is a female writer who is diagnosed with a “nervous condition” that can only be treated through intense “bed rest” and isolation. The portrayal of gender inequality and the oppressive patriarchy is evident through John’s relationship with the woman narrator. As any man in the 1800s, John is in charge of the household and makes every decision, including his wife’s psychiatric treatment. In the beginning, the narrator claims, “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?” (508). In this statement, the narrator is not only emphasizing the role and influence men have over their female partners, but the lack of relevance a woman has in society. The husband’s control over the female is evident in the narrator’s statement, “he is very careful and loving, and hardly lets me stir without special direction.” It was not uncommon for women to misinterpret care and love for manipulation. John, the narrator's husband, has her on rest cure, a very common psychiatric treatment prescribed by psychiatrist, Silas Weir Mitchell, that forced women to remain in isolation and stay away from anything that required physical or mental energy. This treatment proved ineffective through the narrator’s mental journey with the room and the wallpaper. When speaking of the paper she says, "By moonlight it becomes bars"(517). This wallpaper symbolizes her own entrapment within society’s “bars”. Men and their reluctance to allow women the freedom of expression and action are what the metaphorical bars are made out of. The bars of society also illustrate societal norms that force women into domesticity and motherhood.

“The Yellow Wallpaper” vividly illustrates the struggles of women in oppressive environments, reflecting Charlotte Gilman's own experiences and societal critiques. Through her

protagonist's confinement and mistreatment, Gilman exposes the detrimental effects of patriarchal control over women's lives, particularly in the realm of healthcare and personal autonomy. The narrator's enforced "rest cure," prescribed by her physician husband, symbolizes the broader societal restrictions imposed on women, limiting their access to education, intellectual stimulation, and agency. In Gilman's own words, the treatment led her perilously close to "utter mental ruin," highlighting the profound consequences of denying women the opportunity for intellectual engagement and self-expression. Education emerges as a crucial factor in challenging these oppressive norms, as it empowers women to recognize and resist their subjugation. Through the narrator's descent into madness and eventual liberation, Gilman underscores the transformative potential of education in enabling women to confront and overcome the barriers imposed by patriarchal society. Thus, "The Yellow Wallpaper" serves as a poignant reminder of the importance of education in empowering women to navigate and resist oppressive environments, ultimately reclaiming their voices and agency. In the journal article, "Charlotte Perkins Gilman and the Feminization of Education" Deborah M. Simone claims that Gilman wrote a piece for the *Independent* titled "Child Labor and the Schools" where "Gilman painted a broad view of education, defining its 'real interest' as the free exercise of natural faculties, the pursuit of knowledge for the love of it..." Simone also states that in Gilman's journal, the *Forerunner*, "she said the goal of education was to teach individuals to see clearly, to understand, to properly relate one idea to another, to refuse superstition and mere repetition of other people's opinion."

Charlotte Perkins Gilman's advocacy for education as a means of empowerment is evident not only in her fiction but also in her non-fiction works. In a piece for the *Independent* titled "Child Labor and the Schools," Gilman articulates a broad view of education, emphasizing

its role in facilitating the free exercise of natural faculties and the pursuit of knowledge for its own sake. These insights underscore Gilman's belief in the transformative power of education in fostering intellectual autonomy and resistance against oppressive societal norms. Through her writings, Gilman advocates for an educational system that liberates individuals from the confines of traditional gender roles and empowers them to challenge and reshape society's expectations.

The women in “The Yellow Wallpaper” are meant to find contentment in the house; and those who do not are seen as disgraceful and in need of psychiatric help. The narrator describes, “[Jennie] is a perfect and enthusiastic housekeeper, and hopes for no better profession. I verily believe she thinks it is the writing which made me sick!” (512). Gilman satirizes society through Jennie’s character by having her embody the characteristics of the ideal woman during that age. This quote from “The Yellow Wallpaper” emphasizes the importance of education by highlighting the societal expectations imposed on women during the time period. The narrator's observation of Jennie's contentment with her role as a housekeeper reflects the limited opportunities available to women for personal and intellectual fulfillment. Jennie's lack of ambition beyond domestic duties underscores the prevailing belief that a woman's worth is confined to her abilities as a homemaker. Additionally, the narrator's assertion that Jennie attributes her illness to writing suggests a lack of understanding or appreciation for the intellectual pursuits that could provide fulfillment and purpose. I want to be clear, I am not saying that education will fix everyone’s social and personal problems. It is important to note that education can also be oppressive and limiting if not utilized correctly. But in this context, education is a source of enlightenment, and through that enlightenment, individuals, or in this case Jennie’s character, can benefit from education to help her understand the traditional society she clings to and why. Thus, education represents a pathway to empowerment, as it offers

women the opportunity to expand their horizons, challenge societal norms, and pursue their passions beyond traditional gender roles. By contrast, the narrator's confinement and suppression of her creative impulses serve as a stark reminder of the consequences of denying women access to education and intellectual stimulation.

Throughout the story, the author does not provide the narrator's name. Gilman keeps the narrator at almost a respectful distance from the other characters and as well as the readers. She wants to prove that the narrator's inability to adhere to societal expectations drags her into a state of mental and physical isolation. Gilman reinforces the lack of voice and position women had in society by not giving the narrator a name. In addition, the article, "Charlotte Perkins Gilman's "The Yellow Wallpaper": Rhetorical Subversion in Feminist Literature" by Peter J. Marston & Bambi Rockwell utilize feminist ideology throughout the century to portray how women sacrifice their identities at the hand of the patriarchy. Marston and Rockwell defend the suffocating effects of the patriarchy:

Indeed, one of the most notable characteristics of "The Yellow Wallpaper" is that it is so thoroughly subversive, with no corresponding affirmation of an alternative ideology to replace the dominant patriarchy. As Judith Fetterley (1986) observes, the story exposes how men may drive women to insanity through control and calls for women to escape this fate, but the narrator's "escape"-into madness--clearly is no solution, as it denies the narrator both an identity and a place within humanity. (60)

An example of how "men may drive women to insanity through control" is evident in the symbolism of the window. A window is a connection, a link, to the outside world whilst being inside. However, in "The Yellow Wallpaper," it serves as a symbol of trapped feelings and potential freedom. The narrator in the story mentions, "I don't like our room a bit. I wanted one

downstairs that opened on the piazza and had roses all over the window... But John would not hear of it" (509). The symbolism of the window in "The Yellow Wallpaper" underscores the oppressive control exerted by men over women's lives and identities. In denying the narrator's request for a room with a window that opens to the outside world, John effectively restricts her access to freedom and creative expression. The barred windows in the room she is confined to represent the physical and psychological confinement imposed upon her by patriarchal authority. The narrator's desire for a window that connects her to the world beyond the confines of her room reflects her yearning for autonomy and agency in shaping her own identity. However, the denial of this basic request highlights the pervasive nature of oppression, wherein women are systematically deprived of opportunities for self-expression and self-determination.

Gilman's short story raises awareness about the oppressive patriarchy during that era that found the need to control women and their health by stripping them of their identity. In a journal article by Lisa Galullo, "Gothic and the Female Voice: Examining Charlotte Perkins Gilman's "The Yellow Wallpaper," Galullo says:

To preserve what was left of her sanity, Charlotte eventually disregarded Dr. Mitchell's advice, left her husband and moved to Pasadena, California. She gave lectures about women's issues, started a magazine, *The Forerunner*, and began publishing poems and articles. "The Yellow Wallpaper," in its direct protest of doctors' "rest cures" for women sparked Dr. S. Weir Mitchell himself to change his treatment for similar cases.

Although Charlotte Gilman claims her creativity and intelligence were stripped during her time in isolation and confinement, the experience made her a stronger and more capable writer. Her emotional struggles heightened other senses that captured feminism in a new light. As aforementioned in Chapter 1, to struggle is to grow, it is to confront the obstacles and break down

the barriers that society places upon an individual; and through that process become an authentic version of *the self*. According to Park: “identity is not static, but dynamic; it evolves and constantly develops in various social practices. Identity is not an objective feature of a person, but a discursive one constructed continually by social interactions in daily situations in which an individual lives”(1). Thus, the narrator's experience within the confines of the room with the disturbing wallpaper and Gilman’s personal experience with the rest-cure demonstrates the impact of an individual’s presence in diverse societal environments. The push and pull between personal desires and societal expectations molds and creates the identity that Gilman is proud to showcase through her work. It is through Gilman’s ability to overcome her struggles and write “The Yellow Wallpaper” that creates a movement. In an article called “The Rest Cure Revisited,” Diana Martin claims “she wrote “The Yellow Wallpaper” to communicate to Mitchell (and perhaps on some level to her husband) how close to the edge of madness she had come because of the prohibition against work. Years later she was gratified to hear, through friends, that the great neurologist had modified his treatment of neurasthenia after reading her story. Gilman’s short story highlighted the rest cure as a symbol of the paternalistic nature of 19th-century medicine and the suppression of female creativity” (738). Gilman’s struggle and the work she produced influenced a movement and encouraged other writers to speak out against the oppressive nature of the ‘rest-cure’. What education means within this context is an “enlightened experience”, an experience that serves as a driving force for change. Education, the “enlightened experience,” is a pathway towards awareness. Gilman’s awareness of the negative impact of the patriarchal system served as a catalyst for change.

The oppressive nature of societal norms and the limitations placed on women's agency and autonomy are starkly depicted in "The Yellow Wallpaper," where education serves as both a

source of liberation and a tool of control. Charlotte Gilman's personal experience with the rest cure treatment, prescribed by a physician in the late 19th century, highlights the detrimental effects of oppressive medical practices that sought to confine women to domestic roles and suppress their intellectual pursuits. Gilman's realization that isolation led to madness underscores the importance of education and intellectual stimulation for maintaining mental well-being and challenging patriarchal constraints.

On the opposing standpoint, Jennie's character represents the idealized version of womanhood promoted by patriarchal society, where women are expected to find fulfillment and contentment in domestic duties. Jennie's enthusiasm for traditional housekeeping roles contrasts sharply with the narrator's discontent and desire for intellectual stimulation, illustrating the narrow confines within which women were expected to operate. The narrator's anxiety and sense of inadequacy in comparison to Jennie highlight the oppressive nature of gender norms that devalue women's aspirations beyond the domestic sphere.

Overall, "The Yellow Wallpaper" serves as a powerful critique of the oppressive gender roles and societal expectations that limit women's agency and autonomy. Through the lens of education and intellectual freedom, the story sheds light on the importance of challenging patriarchal structures and empowering women to assert their identities and pursue their aspirations beyond the confines of traditional gender roles.

Nineteenth-century society impaired the individual from thinking outside the social norm because the consequence would be to lose respect and gain a bad reputation. To avoid such outcomes, people conformed to societal conventions and lost their individuality. In Kate Chopin's novella, *The Awakening*, Chopin illustrates Edna's, the protagonist, inability to adhere to societal rules and eventually falls into a constant state of melancholy and disappointment.

Through Chopin's portrayal of the juxtaposing characters, Adele and Mademoiselle Reisz, Edna builds her perspective about what she truly wants from life. She is expected to fulfill the duties of a "mother-woman" but fails to do so because she cannot relinquish her identity and freedom for a life of domesticity and submissiveness. Adele, the epitome of a "mother-woman" (14) disapproves of Edna's attitude of giving up, "[my] money, I would give my life for my children; but I wouldn't give myself" (51). Adele fails to understand this concept because she views motherhood as a black and white role; she sees it as absolute devotion to one's family; and instead of admiring this quality, Edna pities her because she lacks individuality and eagerness for life outside societal norm. Furthermore, Edna wants to exist for her children but she realizes that the more she becomes a mother, the less she is Edna. The Creole society expects women to be completely and utterly devoted to their children but Edna rejects this; rather she claims, "I would give up money, I would give up my life for my children but I wouldn't; give up myself" (Chopin, 46). Edna is expected to fulfill the duties of a "mother-woman" but fails because her individuality is too valuable and sacred. The only time Edna experiences freedom and temporary happiness is when she is in the Pigeon house. Since the social conventions of society prevent Edna from gaining an individual self separate from her obligations as a mother and wife, the pigeon house allows her to grow spiritually and socially. The house is a significant place in Edna's journey to her awakening because it represents her strength to separate from her husband both physically and financially. Once again, we see the sociocultural perspective play a role through another character, this one being Edna Pontellier. Her 'growth' and awakening that takes place in the pigeon house proves how one's environment can impact *the self*. When Edna removes herself from her husband's home and finds comfort in the pigeon house, her character begins to change. The narrator says:

The pigeon-house pleased her. It at once assumed the intimate character of a home, while she herself invested it with a charm which it reflected like a warm glow. There was with her a feeling of having descended in the social scale, with a corresponding sense of having risen in the spiritual. Every step which she took toward relieving herself from obligations added to her strength and expansion as an individual. She began to look with her own eyes; to see and to apprehend the deeper undercurrents of life. No longer was she content to “feed upon opinion” when her own soul had invited her. (127)

Edna’s awakening in the pigeon house connects to the ever so powerful idea how one’s environment can shape and change the individual; that a person is not only made up of one’s natural psychological patterns but rather reflective of the environment around them.

Moreover, Leonce Pontellier’s need to control everything around him, as a man would do in this time, is depicted through his decision to remodel the pigeon-house. This act asserts his possession of Edna once again and places her back into that imaginary cage that is created by Leonce and essentially the rest of society. To escape from these ideals, Edna turns to art. Her ability to paint allows for a reproduction of independence and freedom that she longs for personally. Edna’s art is an evolution of her growth and slow escape from the oppressive and overwhelming standards of society. When she is unable to paint Adele, it symbolically mimics that she is unable to be the “ideal” woman that society expects her to be. To Edna, motherhood is an obtrusive and oppressive idea, “a responsibility which she had blindly assumed and for which Fate had not fitted her” (80). When her husband criticizes her paintings, she does not get discouraged, thus depicting her lack of interest and respect towards her husband’s opinions.

Edna’s inability to experience her sexual desires and social aspirations are due to society’s fixation with a woman’s stereotypical role as a mother and wife. Edna’s romantic

relationships with characters Arobin and Robert defy the traditional values of a wife during that era. The narrator illustrates Edna's romantic dreams about Robert, illustrating how the desires of lust and freedom cloud her subconscious. Edna's mind contains the freedoms that she so desires whilst depicting the unattainable nature of her desires through a dream-like state. Society's restrictions placed on women inflict confusion and provoke an internal battle in Edna's subconscious where the lines of right and wrong become skewed.

In *The Awakening* by Kate Chopin, although Edna Pontellier does not receive a formal education in the traditional sense, the novel still illustrates the profound impact of learning and enlightenment on one's identity. While Edna may not attend school or engage in structured academic pursuits, her experiences and interactions within society serve as a form of education that ultimately shapes her understanding of herself and her place in the world. Through her relationships with characters like Mademoiselle Reisz and Adele Ratignolle, Edna gains insights into different perspectives and societal expectations, leading to a gradual awakening of her own desires and ambitions.

The societal norms and expectations prevalent in the Creole society Edna inhabits can be viewed as a form of education in themselves. Edna is constantly surrounded by rigid gender roles and expectations, which serve as a kind of indoctrination into the accepted norms of her time. However, as she becomes increasingly disillusioned with these constraints, Edna begins to question and challenge the teachings of her society, embarking on a journey of self-discovery and liberation. In this way, the societal education Edna receives serves as a catalyst for her eventual rebellion against the oppressive expectations placed upon her as a woman and a mother.

Edna's exploration of art and her own inner desires can be seen as a form of enlightened education, independent of formal schooling. Through painting and other creative pursuits, Edna

gains a deeper understanding of herself and her desires, breaking free from the confines of societal expectations and forging her own path towards self-realization. It is through her environment and the people she meets outside of her domestic sphere that influence and provoke Edna's new path, a path towards enlightenment and awakening. In this sense, education in *The Awakening* is not limited to formal schooling but encompasses the broader process of self-discovery and enlightenment that ultimately leads to the reconstruction of Edna's identity in defiance of societal norms

When Edna reaches her last awakening, she realizes that she has failed to attain a state of contentment and satisfaction, causing the tragic end to her life. Edna has many awakenings that lead to her suicide but the trigger to the last awakening is the conclusion that societal restrictions bind the bars of her inescapable cage. However, her decision to commit suicide is not a demonstration of weakness, rather a sign of strength; it would have been easier to turn off her desires and ambitions and give in to her role as a mother and wife and carry on a peaceful or uneventful life. But her suicide tested her loyalty to her identity because it did not allow her to give in or confine to society's traditional standards.

Unfortunately, in a society that represses emotions and bans rebellion, the characters in "The Yellow Wallpaper" and *The Awakening* are bound to moments of sadness, confusion, and borderline insanity. Some may shut off their emotions in a moment of defeat and come back stronger than before, and others may kill themselves because they refuse to conform and change their identity to please society. Regardless, both Gilman and Chopin achieve their goals of eliciting feelings of anger, denial, and acceptance from their audience through the narrator and Edna.

In the narratives of "The Yellow Wallpaper" and *The Awakening*, the characters' experiences of oppression and the suppression of their identities resonate deeply with the ideas presented by bell hooks and Paulo Freire in *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*. These theorists emphasize the interconnectedness of feminism, education, and oppression, arguing that education is a powerful tool for liberation from oppressive systems. In both stories, the protagonists are confined by patriarchal structures that deny them agency and autonomy, leading to moments of despair and mental anguish. hooks and Freire assert that oppressive societies seek to repress emotions and stifle rebellion, perpetuating cycles of marginalization and subjugation. However, they also highlight the potential for resistance and transformation through education. By gaining critical consciousness and challenging dominant ideologies, individuals can reclaim their voices and assert their identities. The struggles faced by the characters in "The Yellow Wallpaper" and *The Awakening* serve as poignant illustrations of the complex dynamics between feminism, education, and oppression, underscoring the urgency of Freire and hooks' calls for emancipatory education that empowers individuals to confront and dismantle oppressive systems.

In *Teaching to Transgress*, bell hooks delves deeply into the intersectionality of education, feminism, and oppression, advocating for a transformative pedagogy that challenges conventional power structures and fosters critical consciousness. She asserts, "Education is the practice of freedom," emphasizing the liberatory potential of education in dismantling systems of oppression (12). hooks contends that education should not be a tool for reproducing existing power dynamics but rather a means of empowering marginalized voices and disrupting hegemonic norms. Through her pedagogical approach, hooks seeks to cultivate a classroom

environment where students are encouraged to critically engage with the world around them and challenge dominant narratives that perpetuate oppression.

Furthermore, hooks highlights the importance of feminist theory in education as a means of addressing systemic inequalities and empowering marginalized groups. She writes, "Feminist thinking and practice has shown me ways to resist and transform structures of domination, ways to be visionary," underscoring the transformative potential of feminist pedagogy in challenging patriarchal norms and fostering social justice (13). To fight for a purpose, to fight for a right, it feels like building another layer of identity. To walk against the wave despite the challenges and difficulties that come with denying social norms and traditional practices instigates change. As Freire clearly points out in his text, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, "For the truly humanist educator and the authentic revolutionary, the object of the action is the reality to be transformed by them together with other people..."(67). To rebel against conventions and systems of oppression cannot be limited to *thinking* about the change; it has to go beyond thought and enact change, and to change something is to rebel against the foundation set in place. To change systems of oppression in society within and outside the realms of education and to find liberation is to realize that, "The oppressors, who oppress, exploit, and rape by virtue of their power, cannot find in this power the strength to liberate either the oppressed or themselves"(Freire 18).

hooks critiques traditional models of education that prioritize hierarchy and conformity, perpetuating oppressive power dynamics. She asserts, "Most of us who teach have never had pedagogical training that helps us to create accessible, engaging learning environments," highlighting the need for a radical reimagining of educational practices (10). Through her concept of "engaged pedagogy," hooks advocates for a participatory and collaborative approach to teaching and learning that prioritizes dialogue, critical thinking, and collective action. By

centering the voices of marginalized students and challenging oppressive structures within the classroom, hooks seeks to create spaces of empowerment and liberation where education becomes a tool for social change. In her book, *Teaching to Transgress*, she says:

As a teacher, I recognize that students from marginalized groups enter classrooms within institutions where their voices have been neither heard nor welcomed, whether these students discuss facts-those which any of us might know-or personal experience. My pedagogy has been shaped to respond to this reality. If I do not wish to see these students use the “authority of experience” as a means of asserting voice, I can circumvent this possible misuse of power by bringing to the classroom pedagogical strategies that affirm their presence, their right to speak, in multiple ways on diverse topics. This pedagogical strategy is rooted in the assumption that we all bring to the classroom experimental knowledge, that this knowledge can indeed enhance our learning experience. (83-84)

In the pursuit of transformative education and social justice, both bell hooks and Paulo Freire emphasize the urgent need to challenge oppressive structures and empower marginalized groups. While hooks critiques traditional educational models that perpetuate hierarchical power dynamics, Freire underscores the necessity for authentic rebellion and concrete action in dismantling systems of oppression. By enacting change within educational spaces and beyond, both authors assert that liberation cannot be achieved solely through contemplation but requires active resistance against entrenched norms and structures of domination. Emphasizing the power of education to transform society, hooks and Freire call for a radical reimagining of pedagogy that empowers individuals to challenge and change the world around them.

In contrast to the oppressive cages depicted in *The Awakening* and "The Yellow Wallpaper," the narrative of *The Freedom Writers Diary* and its cinematic adaptation "Freedom

Writers" shines a beacon of hope on the transformative power of education. Through the lens of real-life experiences, these works illuminate the journey of marginalized students who rise above systemic oppression and personal adversities under the guidance of their teacher, Erin Gruwell. The story unfolds as these students from diverse backgrounds, fraught with racism, gang violence, poverty, and familial dysfunction, discover the strength of their voices and agency through the act of writing. Unlike the confined spaces of societal expectations that ensnared Edna Pontellier and the narrator in "The Yellow Wallpaper," the classroom of the Freedom Writers becomes a sanctuary where these students find liberation and empowerment through education. As the students in "The Freedom Writers Diary" and "Freedom Writers" confront the harsh realities of their circumstances, they embark on a journey of self-discovery and resilience.

4 Unveiling the Role of Education

The Freedom Writers Diary and its film adaptation, *Freedom Writers*, serve as powerful narratives that explore the intersection of education, oppression, and identity. Based on the real-life experiences of Erin Gruwell and her high school students, depict the transformative power of education in the face of systemic oppression and personal struggles. At its core, the story follows a group of students from diverse backgrounds who, through the guidance of their teacher, discover their voices and agency through writing. In the film, Erin Gruwell is played by actress, Hilary Swank, whose performance authentically portrays Gruwell's role and relationship with classroom 203 and the students in it.

In both the book and the movie, the students grapple with various forms of oppression, including racism, gang violence, poverty, and familial dysfunction. These oppressive forces not only shape their external realities but also impact their sense of self and identity. Many of the students initially view themselves as powerless and insignificant, internalizing the negative stereotypes and low expectations imposed upon them by society. However, as they engage in critical dialogue and self-reflection, they begin to challenge these oppressive narratives and reclaim their identities as individuals worthy of respect and dignity. In one of the scenes in the book and in the movie, Erin Gruwell takes a piece of paper away from one of the students, a paper that was being passed around and laughed at. When she opens the paper, she sees that it is a racial caricature of one of the students with exaggerated lips. Out of pure anger Gruwell yells, "This is the type of propaganda that the Nazis used during the Holocaust..." The confusion on the students' faces prompted a change of curriculum and the beginning of the Freedom Writers.

Although the actions of Erin Gruwell were well-intentioned, she did receive criticism after the release of the movie. In *The Guardian* article, it states, “Oh no, not another white, liberal do-gooder set on single-handedly helping the kids out of the ghetto. Set against the backdrop of the 1992 Los Angeles riots, this is almost a textbook classroom drama, inevitably “based on a remarkable true story” and backed up by a hip-hop score.” The savior complex criticism is valid; that a woman from Newport Beach who has a comfortable lifestyle is trying to relate to a group of under privileged students and encourage them to get along and do their homework assignments. These kids did not have simple lifestyles, most of them did not have homes to return to after school. They were 14/15 years old with the worries of an adult, of providing for their families. They did not see the meaning in learning about a “dead white guy in tights” (a reference to Shakespeare). So when Erin Gruwell introduced the topic of the Holocaust, the students were able to relate and connect their own stories to those of Anne Frank’s and to many more examples/stories of oppression. It was Gruwell’s ability to get the students to connect to narratives similar to theirs that allowed for the expansion and integration of new ideas. Once she was able to grasp their attention, it was easier to have them analyze works and stray away from the mindset of it’s ‘me vs. them’. She made sure they knew it was a collective effort and that the classroom is not a place of dictatorship or tyranny.

In the movie, Gruwell and Margaret Campbell, the head of the English Department, discuss student’s textbooks. Campbell does not allow Gruwell to use the ‘nice and clean’ books because she believes they will destroy them and write ‘nonsense’ in them. Gruwell’s argument to that mentality is that it is with that mindset that makes the students believe they are good enough, that they are not worthy enough to have nice books like the rest of the students. It is people like Campbell in the education system that provoke and push for segregation. Campbell comments,

“you cannot force everyone to want an education.” Intentionally or unintentionally, it is small decisions like this that push the agenda of oppression within classrooms, affecting the identity and the self of students. If you treat students like they are not good enough, they will not be obligated to prove you wrong. Thus, Gruwell takes on another job to pay for a new set of books for the students so that they can have brand new books to read from. In the movie, it depicts the students smelling and caressing the new books with surprise. Gruwell built trust with her students by giving them her trust and respect. By recognizing that they were more than who society said they were, more than who the education system said they could be. This exchange of trust and respect created a safe space in classroom 203 at Woodrow Wilson High.

Paulo Freire's ideas on education as a tool for liberation resonate deeply with the themes portrayed in *The Freedom Writers Diary* and *Freedom Writers*. Freire emphasizes the importance of dialogue, critical consciousness, and praxis in the educational process, arguing that true liberation can only be achieved through collective action and social transformation. In the context of the Freedom Writers' journey, Freire's methods weave themselves in Erin Gruwell's pedagogical approach, empowering students to critically analyze their lived experiences and challenge the oppressive structures that perpetuate inequality. Freire says, “Humans...because they are aware of themselves and thus of the world- because they are *conscious beings*- exist in a dialectical relationship between the determination of limits and their own freedom” (72). In the film *Freedom Writers*, this quote from Paulo Freire resonates deeply with the transformative journey of Erin Gruwell and her students. Throughout the movie, we witness the students' evolving awareness of themselves and their surroundings, as well as their growing consciousness of the limitations imposed upon them by societal expectations and systemic oppression. For example, in the book, *The Freedom Writers' Diary*, when Erin Gruwell

confronts the racial caricature drawn by one of the students, she ignites a dialogue that challenges the students' perceptions of themselves and their place in the world. She says:

When I got a hold of the picture, I went ballistic. “This is the type of propaganda that the Nazis used during the Holocaust...When a student timidly asked me, “What’s the Holocaust?” I was shocked. I asked, “How many of you have heard of the Holocaust?” Not a single person raised his hand. Then I asked, “How many of you have been shot at?” Nearly every hand went up. I immediately decided to throw out my planned lessons and make tolerance the core of my curriculum...I would try to bring history to life...(2-3)

Gruwell's response mirrors Freire's emphasis on critical consciousness, as she urges her students to recognize the harmful effects of stereotypes and prejudice. Gruwell recognizes the danger of ignorance and the importance of teaching tolerance to counteract prejudice and discrimination. The decision to ask the question, “How many of you have been shot at?,” and use it as a means of shifting the curriculum to focus on tolerance, demonstrates a commitment to fostering critical consciousness among the students. By addressing real-world and personal issues, and connecting them to historical events, Gruwell encourages her students to see discrimination, bias, and prejudice in their own lives and communities, through their confrontation with oppressive conditions. This approach aligns with Freire's emphasis on education as a tool for liberation and social change. In *The Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, Freire says, “In order for the oppressed to be able to wage the struggle for their liberation, they must perceive the reality of oppression not as a closed world from which there is no exit, but as a limiting situation which they can transform”(23). The setting of Gruwell’s classroom and the topic of tolerance and social change through books and speakers, students begin to take control and challenge injustice in their own lives and communities whilst drawing connections from their personal struggles with oppression.

Similarly, bell hooks's teaching pedagogy sheds light on how the process of education can function as a form of resistance to oppression. hooks argues for an inclusive and intersectional form of education that prioritizes the experiences of marginalized individuals and fosters critical thinking and self-empowerment, placing the instructor at the same level as the students. In an interview between Ron Scapp and bell hooks, hooks says:

Ron, let's start with talking about how we see ourselves as teachers. One of the ways that this books has made me think about my teaching process is that I feel that the way I teach has been fundamentally structured by the fact that I never wanted to be an academic, so that I never has a fantasy of myself as a professor already worked out in my imagination before I entered the classroom. I think that's been meaningful, because it's freed me up to feel that the professor is something I become as opposed to a kind of identity that's already structured and I carry with me into the classroom (132-133).

In chapter 3, I mention how education can have the ability to be oppressive so I would like to expand on that thought. One of the signs of an oppressive educational environment is the dynamic between teacher and student. When teachers place themselves above the students and leave the impression of an authoritarian figure rather than a guide, it can limit and hinder student learning. Let me explain further as to what I mean: bell hooks' pedagogy reveals a teaching method that does not place the teacher above the students. She does not walk into the classroom with preconceived notions in regard to the role she plays, leaving the space open, free of barriers and false implications. I try to follow a similar ideology in my own Rhetoric and composition classroom. Students already walk in with the mindset that they are inferior to the person speaking in front of them or labeled as the "professor". However, when we relinquish the hierarchy in a classroom, it is evident that students start to take agency for their learning; and it is through

agency that students grow and develop identities authentic to themselves, not ones molded from being in a place of inferiority. A teacher's presence in the classroom plays a large role in dismantling the barriers in a classroom between student and teacher. In order to give students the environment where they can develop *the self* through agency, one has to "work in the classroom" (138). In *Teaching to Transgress*, Ron Scapp and bell hooks discuss the idea of liberatory pedagogy and "how it demands that one work in the classroom, and that one work with the limits of the body, work both with and through and against those limits: teachers may insist that it doesn't matter whether you stand behind the podium or the desk, but it does"(138). In the film, "Freedom Writers", one of the first scenes of Erin Gruwell standing in front of the classroom behind her desk sets a scene of clear separation between her and the students. The frame of this specific scene show the symbolic and quite literal separation of mind and body between Gruwell and her students. Once she becomes more comfortable and begins to move around the classroom, the students' body language, as well as their responses begin to shift. Of course, the storyline of her curriculum shift plays a role in student participation and involvement, but without the dismantling of the physical barrier, the impact of Gruwell's pedagogy would not have been as effective.

In *The Freedom Writers Diary* and *Freedom Writers*, the students' writing becomes a tool for self-expression and liberation, allowing them to confront their own internalized oppression and amplify their voices in the face of adversity. Their relationship with their teacher, Erin Gruwell, becomes one of the driving forces in their agency to learn, to want to learn. As aforementioned, the head of the English department tells Erin Gruwell, "you can't make someone want an education"; and after thinking about that statement for a while, I thought that it is true. You can't make someone want an education, but you *can* provide a safe space that

encourages different opinions and supply the tools that allow students to make their *own* connections from the information at hand, not one's dictated by the teacher. You *can* create a space where the distinction between student and teacher is only evident through the teacher's role as a guide and facilitator, not an authority figure. The second a teacher places themselves above the students is when he/she/they divides the class in two. This divide can invoke feelings of anxiety, unease and insecurity which can affect participation, involvement, and consequently, re-shape the self.

Comparing the social context of the late 1800s, as depicted by works by Gilman and Chopin, to the social context portrayed by Freedom Writers, created nearly a century later, offers insights into the evolution of public attitude towards education and its effects on society. As follows, in the late 1800s, "The Yellow Wallpaper" by Gilman and *The Awakening* by Chopin, education is touched upon as a form of liberation from the constraints placed on women at that time. Education for women was reduced to domestic skills and conformity with society's standards, which defined the primary role of a woman as a wife and a mother. The rebellious protagonists of these works find themselves through education, reconnecting with essential parts of their identity over societal constraints. Fast forward to the late 20th-century, Freedom Writers show education as a form of empowerment and the force for social good. The film reflects a time of increasing diversity and social awareness, with education seen as a means of breaking cycles of poverty and violence. Erin Gruwell acknowledges the need to learn tolerance and consider various perspectives and voices, similar to the ideals of bell hooks and Paulo Freire's educational philosophy. Yet, late 20th-century education is not the peak of social values in public education, and the public can expect much more from the promise of 21st-century educational practices. The 21st century has changed education through technological advancements. People are able to

connect all over the world and read and listen to the perspectives of those from different cultural and socioeconomic backgrounds. However, there is always a *bug* in the system. With the luxury of technology, comes the responsibility of technology; because of access to so many sources and social media platforms, complications regarding social and emotional development arise. There is a dependence on the internet and the media for knowledge and information but I hope through the still highly relevant teachings of hooks and Freire, classrooms or systems of education can prevail and aid this new stage of change and growth.

5 Conclusion

In the exploration of her own emotions and desires, Edna in *The Awakening* embarks on a journey that resonates deeply with Paulo Freire's concept of conscientização, or critical consciousness. As Freire emphasized, education is not merely about acquiring knowledge but understanding the world and one's place within it. Edna's awakening to her own identity parallels Freire's notion of individuals critically analyzing their social reality. Similarly, bell hooks' teachings on education as a site of resistance against oppression find resonance in Edna's defiance of restrictive ideologies. Through Edna's journey, we witness the transformative potential of education in challenging societal norms and reclaiming agency.

In "The Yellow Wallpaper," the unnamed protagonist's journey aligns with Freire's emphasis on education as a means of liberation. As the protagonist grapples with her confinement and societal expectations, she embodies Freire's vision of individuals striving for continuity of experience and solidarity with their ideals. Additionally, bell hooks' insights into the intersectionality of oppression and the power of education to empower marginalized voices and illuminate the protagonist's quest for autonomy and self-discovery. By confronting the oppressive structures symbolized by the yellow wallpaper and acknowledging 'the bars' that compose the wallpaper, the protagonist engages in the process of self-liberation that echoes Hooks' call for education as a tool for social change.

Furthermore, Erin Gruwell and the Freedom Writers exemplify Freire's concept of critical pedagogy in action. Gruwell's dedication to her students and innovative teaching methods echo Freire's emphasis on dialogue, critical thinking, and participatory learning. Through their shared experiences and stories, the Freedom Writers challenge systemic injustices and find solidarity in their struggles, embodying hooks' vision of education as a site of resistance against oppression.

Through a 'traditional' classroom, Erin Gruwell breaks the barriers of formal education and introduces students to a journey of self-discovery through literature and important figures in class 203. Their journey underscores the transformative power of education in fostering personal growth and collective liberation.

In conclusion, the transformative power of education in challenging oppressive structures and empowering individuals to assert their agency and autonomy is evident in *The Awakening*, "The Yellow Wallpaper," and the story of Erin Gruwell and the Freedom Writers. By weaving together literary texts, educational philosophy, and feminist discourse, this thesis illuminates the profound impact of education on identity formation and social change. The sociocultural perspective mentioned throughout this thesis brings together the idea that the educational environment or environments outside the realm of a traditional school setting, play a pivotal role in making and breaking down one's identity. Through critical consciousness, dialogue, and awareness, oppressive structures yield the reins, and education becomes a catalyst for liberation.

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