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**The Penalization of Agentic Female Characters in Literature: An
Analysis of *The Awakening* and *Looking for Alaska***

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Abstract

Adolescents tend to identify with literary characters to a considerable degree, and it is therefore vital to advocate the distinction between healthy and unhealthy characters in the secondary classroom. This thesis aims to investigate the intertwining topics of mental health and gender roles in Kate Chopin's canonical novel *The Awakening* (1899) and John Green's young adult fiction novel *Looking for Alaska* (2005). These topics are part of the interdisciplinary topic of health and life skills, which should be facilitated in all subjects in the Norwegian classroom. In this thesis, I explore how this can be done by looking at how the novels' prominent female characters portray agency yet become penalized for it. The novels both portray patriarchy, suicide, and feminism, though to distinct approaches. This analysis shows that the novels differ in their attitudes towards agentic women and that newer fiction is not inevitably a healthier ideal for learning than canonical fiction. Additionally, this thesis emphasizes that combining canonical fiction and young adult fiction gives the best learning outcome to facilitate learning within health and life skills in the English subject.

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1 Introduction

Studies on young adult fiction (YAF) claim that young girls tend to involve in literature more than anyone, even to the degree that they use YAF as a “guide to life” (Kokesh & Sternadori 139). In that case, young women are in need of healthy fictional characters to identify with. This is especially important considering the societal need to define femininity, which seems to be never-ending. Wherever you turn, it seems to be certain expectations of how you should behave, and not behave, then especially as a woman. According to Kokesh et al., the “femininity stereotypes are negative in regard to women who have relatively significant agency and/or wish to expand it” (141). In other words, women who are determined, ambitious, and independent are not to be considered feminine. Acknowledging this, powerful women seem to be considered a collective threat.

YAF is frequently used in the classroom justified by its “moral sense that helps teens consider right and wrong” in our “complex world with unique 21st-century problems” (Alsup, as cited in Rybakova & Roccanti 32). But what is right and wrong? When it comes to gender, it seems to be determined by the social constructs of femininity and masculinity. In 1974, The Bem Sex-Role Inventory introduced a scale of the masculine and feminine traits that were judged to be socially desired for men and women. There, the following traits were (among others) categorized as masculine: ambitious, dominant, self-sufficient, defending own beliefs, independent. The feminine traits, on the other hand, were (among others) categorized as: shy, understanding, gentle, cheerful, eager to soothe hurt feelings, yielding (Bem 156). These characteristics imply that men are able to possess a great amount of agency, while women are not. Bem’s report might be from the 70’s, however, the gendered stereotypes are still of excessive societal influence, highly affecting our younger population.

YAF is a modern adaptation to literature specifically for adolescents, which is designed to be more suitable and relatable than the canonical fiction that we consider the classics. When YAF often is used as a guide to life and is supposed to help young readers to differ between right and wrong, it can quickly become a pitfall. A novel can be all over convenient, but problematic when helpful guidance or a point in the right direction comes at the expense of another conflict that remain unconcerned. YAF might address modern problems that young readers find relatable, but it is important to not oversee the bigger and timeless conflicts that seemingly never overcome. Canonical fiction might be presumed outdated, but with its literary quality and insight in historical societal issues that shaped our lives today, it can be a great

resource in the classroom. YAF and canonical fiction both has its flaws, but together they can serve a greater purpose to ideally create a safe space for learning and reading.

To demonstrate this idea, I will consider it from a learning perspective in the English subject. With Kunnskapsløftet 2020, within the Norwegian core curriculum, three interdisciplinary topics were introduced to be facilitated in all subjects in school. One of them is health and life skills. In health and life skills, many complex topics come up, among them are mental health and gender roles. Some might believe that these topics are irrelevant for subjects such as the English subject, but what better way is it to rebuke such issues than distancing them to a fictional third space to escape to, such as in literature? I believe the best way to facilitate learning within health and life skills in the English subject is to work with complimentary literature with different qualities, such as YAF and canonical fiction. We can do this by looking at relevant issues, here the intertwining topics of mental health and gender roles, and to process characters that are both healthy- and unhealthy to identify with.

In this MA, I will exemplify this by using two novels addressing the connection between gender roles and mental health. The first one is the canonical novel *The Awakening* (1899) by Kate Chopin, and the second novel is the YAF novel *Looking for Alaska* (2005) by John Green. I choose to use these novels because of their topics such as suicide, patriarchy, and female agency, but also because of their diverging qualities, one being YAF and one being canonical fiction. When looking at similar problematic situations in different types of novels with different qualities, I believe it can create awareness around the importance of being critical to literature, and it will enhance an insight in different values and attitudes within the same topic. It is though not only the health issues that are of interest, but the way they are dealt with – or not dealt with in the novel. When adolescents tend to identify with fictional characters to the degree that they use what they learn in real-life situations, it is important that they have healthy ideal to look up to. I will contemplate this in the given novels by analysing the characters behaviours, depictions, and dialogue. Altogether, I will investigate how diverging literature, addressing the intertwining issues of gender roles and mental health, together can facilitate learning within the topic of health and life skills better in the secondary classroom. I will do this by analysing how the female characters in the canonical novel *The Awakening* and the YAF novel *Looking for Alaska* portray female agency and how they become penalized for it in various ways.

1.1 The two novels

1.1.1 *The Awakening*

In this MA, I am going to analyse the two one by one, but first I will give a general overview of the two. The first novel is *The Awakening* by the well-known author Kate Chopin - a feminist work from the late 1800s. The main character is a young woman, wife, and mother in the time of The Cult of True Womanhood – where the woman's only place is in the home. The novel touch on topics relevant for health and life skills such as: gender roles, mental health, patriarchy, and suicide. The main character is Edna Pontellier. She is the wife of the wealthy Mr. Pontellier and the mother of two children: Raoul and Etienne. When vacationing in France with her family, she realizes that she is tired of being the ideal wife and mother and she decides to change her life. Her thoughts become increasingly oppressing regarding femininity and motherhood, up to the point that she stops doing what is expected of her. Her actions lead her to a mental and sexual awakening, and she is thrilled by how it makes her feel. Edna falls in love with Robert, has a flirt with Arobyn, and moves out of her shared home with her husband. Eventually, the desire she encounters makes her realize the true dimension of her recent sexual, social, and mental adjustments, and she decides that she cannot endure it. Edna ends her life in the sea, where she initially first realized the beginning of her awakening.

Canonical literature can easily be presumed by young and inexperienced readers, and is often disregarded because of its age, and its valuable literary quality becomes insignificant. Regardless of this, the novel is short, and the language is simple, which makes it great for classroom use. The novel also work as an important reminder of the position women were put in, not so many years ago, and enlightens how far these confinements have developed. When comparing the novel to women's position in society today it implies a great change, which is true. What is not clarified, is how the construction of femininity is problematic also today. In comparison with the late 1800s, today's society appear to be equal, yet gender roles still exist, and women are still sexualized and supressed. Therefore, I intend to compare *The Awakening* with a modern novel with a similar agentic female character that faces the same tragic destiny as Edna and compare both novels' attitudes towards agentic women.

1.1.2 *Looking for Alaska*

The second novel I will elaborate on in this paper is John Green's young adult novel *Looking for Alaska* from 2005, which is one of several books from this bestselling and award-winning

author. The novel is narrated from a teenager's perspective, and its significant themes includes mental health, friendship, death, and affiliation. The novel is praised for its important and moving topics, and how it portrays such a difficult affair as death. The novel's narrator is the careful and quiet Miles Halter, also referred to as "Pudge", who moves away from all he knows and what is safe in order to go to boarding school to find the "Great Perhaps" - the famous last words of Francois Rabelais. In boarding school, he meets and befriends the extraordinary Alaska Young, who is seemingly not like other girls he knows. She is intelligent, sexy, unstable, and rebellious. Pudge shares, with the reader, his boarding school experiences, which mainly contains girls, sexual encounters, smoking, drinking strawberry wine, pranking, and his great affection for Alaska. The novel takes the reader through the time before and after the big incident of the novel: the suicide of Alaska. Pudge, and his friends, grieve Alaska and simultaneously spend all their time trying to figure out what happened to her: if her death was an accident or not.

Looking for Alaska is relevant because of the many fragile issues it discusses. Mental health and suicide can be difficult matters of discussion, nevertheless still important ones to discuss without getting too personal about it, especially from a school perspective. The book is easy to read and relatable for adolescents because of the main characters' age. It is though not only the topics of the novel itself that makes it important to address in the classroom, but also its problematic representation of gender roles. The novel is written from a male perspective by a male author and is still accounting for many opinions about women and feminism, which is questionable. The novel exemplifies several female stereotypes and shows clearly how gendered oppression is still an issue, even today.

My analysis will be mainly critical, when I wish to address the issue of the novels problematic view on women. Greens portrayal of Alaska is alarming but is more comprehensible considering *Looking for Alaska* was his first novel, written as a young man. I do not wish to generalize or criticise male authors with this analysis, however, I wish to enlighten how Green's depictions of- and attitudes towards women, in this particular novel, can affect young readers. I believe his writing, as well as his values, has developed since then. *The Fault in Our Stars* (2012) exemplifies this development, where he introduces a strong female character who positively develops throughout the novel.

1.2 Structural overview

Having introduced my thesis, I will now elaborate on the structure of my chapters. In my second chapter, I will introduce some of the theories necessary to answer my research questions. Firstly, I will elaborate more on the interdisciplinary topic of health of life skills. I will go further into what it is, its purpose, as well as its issues, and its relevance to my novels. I will explain some general concepts concerning gender roles. Within gender roles, I will elaborate on feminist theory in general and The Cult of True Womanhood, which defines what a “true woman” is supposed to be. I will then move on to women’s mental health and suicide. Secondly, I will address some theoretical background on literature and learning in connection with difficult topics and discuss canonical fiction and YAF as genres. Lastly, I will elaborate on three relevant terms: agency, stereotypes, and identification, which is necessary for my further analysis.

My third chapter will be an analysis chapter concerning Kathe Chopin's canonical work *The Awakening*, where I consider Edna as a character, but also the novel itself, as a healthy ideal for young readers in the sense of female agency and the response to it. I will first introduce Edna, the female protagonist, and why she is an interesting character for this matter. Generally, I will exemplify how she portrays female agency and how she is punished for it by her surroundings. I will do this by first, looking into the topic of gender roles and how Edna is agentic in that sense. I am taking into consideration how both men, and the other women, address Edna, and the problematic society she finds herself in. I will also investigate how she illustrates agency in her sexuality and in motherhood. Then, I will continue with the topic of mental health and consider how Edna is agentic in the sense of her “awakening”. I will contemplate how her awakening can be seen as a turbulent vision of what life is and how Edna's death can be seen as a powerful message.

My fourth chapter will be my second analytical chapter concerning John Green’s YAF novel *Looking for Alaska*. In this chapter, I will also analyse a strong female character, Alaska, which is not the protagonist of this novel, but a strong side character. I will also here consider her agency and whether the novel and Alaska as a character, can be seen as a healthy ideal for young readers, through the way she is penalized by, not only her surroundings, but the author himself. Firstly, I will look into the topic of gender roles: the sexualization of Alaska, how she relates to The Cult of True Womanhood, and the general views on feminism in the novel.

Secondly, I will consider the topic of mental health and her reflective character, her mental health issues, and the meaning of her suicide.

The fifth chapter will be a combination of an overview of, and perspective on, my MA and my concluding points. I will consider the novels side by side and compare my analytic observations about Edna and Alaska concerning their sexuality, interaction with others, character development, and their suicides. Further, I will summarize my chapters and reflect on the usage of the novels in the classroom. Finally, I will look at what my findings can contribute to.

2 Theoretical framework

2.1 Health and life skills

For the Norwegian teacher, the core curriculum is an essential tool. With the relatively recent renewal of the core curriculum, 'Kunnskapsløftet 2020', many changes and new ideas were applied, that all Norwegian teachers must adapt to. There is a section for "principles for education and all-around development" in the current core curriculum. In short, this says that the school has a dual mission to not only teach the syllabus but also participate in the lifelong process of developing the children's "all-round development, intellectual freedom, independence, responsibility, and compassion for others" (Utdanningsdirektoratet, "Principles for education and all-round development"). As a part of the principles for education and overall development, there are three interdisciplinary topics that should be facilitated for in school. The interdisciplinary topics are: health and life skills, democracy and citizenship, and sustainable development. Further about these topics, it says that the pupils should "gain insight into challenges and dilemmas in these topics" and that they "must understand where [they] can find solutions through knowledge and collaboration" (Utdanningsdirektoratet, "Principles for education and all-round development"). That is, these interdisciplinary topics should be taken into consideration in all subjects in both primary and secondary school.

The interdisciplinary topics have different purposes but should all be facilitated as much as possible in all subjects. Health and life skills is supposed to give the students the competence for a stable mental- and physical health, as well as the competence to make responsible life choices. Democracy and citizenship should create knowledge around democracy, as well as its values and rules, to prepare for when the students themselves participate in such democratic processes. The third interdisciplinary topic of sustainable development should participate in the student's understanding of development in and different dilemmas, in society, with a big focus on maintaining life on earth (Utdanningsdirektoratet, "Interdisciplinary topics").

In this MA, the novels in question exemplify issues concerning mental- and physical health, therefore my main focus further will be restricted to health and life skills, which is the most suitable here. What are the issues and specific topics in health and life skills, and why is it relevant for this thesis? The main goal of this interdisciplinary topic is, as mentioned, sound physical and mental health and the ability to make responsible life choices. Within these topics again, Utdanningsdirektoratet says this about the topics concerning health and life skills:

Relevant areas within this topic are physical and mental health, lifestyle habits, sexuality and gender, drug abuse, media use, consumption, and personal economy. Other issues that come under this topic are value choices and the importance of meaning in life and relations with others, the ability to draw boundaries and respect others' boundaries, and the ability to deal with thoughts, feelings, and relationships." (Utdanningsdirektoratet, "Health and life skills")

Both *The Awakening* and *Looking for Alaska* can be great examples for learning within health and life skills, considering the similar topics represented in both. *The Awakening* is mainly about the journey towards a sexual and mental awakening and how Edna, as a female, manages to deal with it despite her gender and the strict conservative ways of the time. Throughout, she struggles with mental health issues as a side effect and eventually decides to end her life because she cannot live with the entity of it. The narrative of *Looking for Alaska*, on the other hand, is not directly focused on sexuality or gender but mainly on death – though death that is caused by mental health issues. The novel is also full of questionable quotes and situations concerning gender and sexuality.

Utdanningsdirektoratet briefly explains the content and purpose of the interdisciplinary topics, though it lacks information about how to do this. The interpretation of the interdisciplinary topics is up to each individual teacher. It does establish extensive creative freedom and flexibility, but there is also no way to make sure this is implemented. This puts a significant amount of pressure and trust on the teachers. However, it can also be an opportunity to make a difference. Being a teacher indeed has a much more substantial purpose than passing on knowledge from the syllabus. At Utdanningsdirektoratet, it is a very brief explanation of what they mean with 'health' and 'life skills'. All they say about health is: "[a] society which gives the individual the platform from which to make good health choices will greatly impact health" (Utdanningsdirektoratet, "Health and Life Skills"). It appears that by health, they mean that the students should have the knowledge to make responsible choices concerning their health, both physical and mental. Nevertheless, what is the "correct" knowledge here? The teachers' opinions? Further, it says that life skills should influence "the ability to understand and influence factors that are important for mastering one's own life", which is also a considerably open aim (Utdanningsdirektoratet, "Health and Life Skills").

Despite the narrow outline for health and life skills, its relevant content is spread over a very broad spectre. I will narrow my area of focus and go further in-depth on the topic of mental

health and gender roles. This is because of the topics repeating appearance in both my chosen novels, and it can therefore facilitate learning within health and life skills. Before I elaborate further on the novels and my analysis, I will briefly explain what I mean by gender roles and mental health.

2.1.1 Gender roles

2.1.1.1 Feminist theory

The question of gender is frequently on the agenda in the 21st century. How many genders do we have? What does gender mean? Can you have several genders? The debate is endless, and we cannot seem to agree. Some seem to think we only have two genders, and some believe you can have plenty. I will not go further into the gender debate at this level, but I will go into the issue of gender roles. Around the early 1970s, the first women's studies programs were founded, and feminist theory became academically institutionalized. Feminist theory can be seen as a critical theory that discusses the limitations of "popular assumptions about sex, race, sexuality, and gender and offers insights into the social production of complex hierarchies of difference" (Disch & Hawkesworth 1). Feminist theory challenges the fact that there are socially privileged men that solely have written all "philosophy, science, literature, and other 'authoritative' accounts of the world" (Disch & Hawkesworth 6). Feminist studies often criticize the gender constructions we live with today, and the separation of men and women is compared with racial segregation (Disch & Hawkesworth 9).

A central term within feminist theory, and the assumptions of gender, is *embodiment*, meaning that "the body is a site for the symbolic construction of sexual difference, a ground for political exclusion or inclusion, a locus of subjectivity, a prospect for self-realization, and the material focus of many labours that typically fall to women and/or define femininity" (Threadcraft 1). In other words, your body defines who you are to others. Women have been expected to take care of children-, men-, and older people's bodies, but most of all, their own. The female body is expected to work as an "ornamental surface for the male gaze", nothing else (Threadcraft 1).

Judith Butler suggests that is a clear split between sex and gender, where gender can be perceived as the "cultural meanings that the sexed body assumes" (Butler 9). If gender constructions are independent of sex, gender becomes free-floating. This means that the concept of being a man or woman, or masculine or feminine, becomes independent from having a male

or female body (Butler 9). This is the newer perception of gender that is as far from The Cult of True Womanhood ideology as possible, which I will elaborate on in the next section.

2.1.1.2 The Cult of True Womanhood

In the late 1800s America, The Cult of True Womanhood ideology embodies the recipe for the ideal woman. The Cult of True Womanhood was the standard that women compared themselves to, and the standard they were judged by their husbands, their neighbours, and society in general. Anyone who disagreed was damned as an enemy of God (Welter 152). As presented by magazines, religious literature, and gift annuals, the woman was a hostage in her own home (Welter 151). The factors that mothers, daughters, sisters, and wives were judged by were divided into the following categories: piety, purity, submissiveness, and domesticity (Welter 152). Kate Chopin's *The Awakening* was published around the time period of this ideology, and there we are introduced to several types of women that are comparable to this. This was a completely different time than the publication of *Looking for Alaska*.

In *The Cult of True Womanhood 1820-1860*, Barbara Welter collected the ideas of The Cult of True Womanhood: firstly, piety, or religion, should be the core of a woman's virtue (152). Dr. Charles Meigs even claimed that women were naturally religious, and Caleb Atwater said that religion was just what a woman needed. Most importantly, "church work would not make a woman less submissive or domestic (Welter 153). The second factor, is purity, whose absence would be unnatural and unfeminine (Welter 154). Men could sin repeatedly, but it was nothing they could help. Women, who were much "stronger and purer", had to resist giving in for a man to "take liberties incompatible with her delicacy", says Thomas Branagan in *The Excellency of the Female Character* (Welter 155). Purity was considered the "highest beauty" (Welter 157). Further comes female submission. Marriage was an obvious necessity for women to be happy (Welter 158). It was the females' weak existence that made them so fragile that they had to be submissive in a relationship and were in need of a "protector". "Woman," said the physician, "has a head almost too small for intellect but just big enough for love" (Welter 159-160). Lastly, domesticity was one of the most valued factors in woman's magazines. A woman's task was to keep the home to be a pleasant place, so her husband, sons, and brothers would not seek elsewhere for happiness. The female role in the household was fronted in journal titles such as: "Woman, Man's Best Friend", "Woman, The Greatest Social Benefit", or "Woman, a Being To Come Home To" (Welter 163). Women were to care for the home but were also allowed to have some activities for their own enjoyment, such as needlework, arts

and crafts, playing instruments, writing letters, or even reading. Girls did though have to be careful with books, so it would not ruin them (Welter 165-166). Despite the significant factors of piety, purity, submissiveness, and domesticity, there were other essential values as a woman to keep in mind. Being a wife was a big expectation, and marriage was even used to cure “difficult” girls. According to Samuel Miller, the wife had the following duties for her man: to be the counselor and friend of the husband, to lighten his cares and to soothe his sorrows, to warn him against dangers, and to comfort him under trials. It was a big responsibility, being a wife. “[I]n becoming a mother, you have reached the climax of your happiness”, said Mrs. Sigourney. In other words, a true woman would love her children and care for her husband (Welter 170-171).

The Cult of True Womanhood can be seen in connection with both *The Awakening* and *Looking for Alaska*. In *The Awakening*, The Cult of True Womanhood represent the brutal reality of the society Edna is living in and the expectations for her appearance. It is also a resource in her agentic rebellion, where she challenges this stereotype despite of its dominance in society. In *Looking for Alaska*, I will compare Alaska to The Cult of True Womanhood ideal, which still can be considered an ideal for the feminine stereotype, often romanticised in the patriarchal society Alaska find herself in. Both, I will elaborate on in greater detail in my analysis chapters.

2.1.2 Mental health

Women's mental health has been misunderstood and labelled insignificant for research for many years. The first mental disorder concerning women was the well-known “illness” hysteria, which was a female disease exclusively, existing for as much as 4000 years, and mainly revolved around women having mood disorders. It was a disease associated with evil witchcraft and treated with experimental therapy and cured with “herbs, sex or sexual abstinence” (Tasca, Rapetti, Carta & Fadda 110). In the 21st-century, women's health is still down-prioritized. Statistics from WHO's "World Health Statistics 2021" show that women, among other less fortunate groups, still have "higher exposures to many health risks, lower access to health services and lower health literacy and consequently face poorer health outcomes” (IV). Thus, women are a suppressed group in the mental health sector as well.

According to Deborah Suiter Gentry, suicide is often portrayed gendered in literature. She claims that we can differentiate between the literary constructions of suicide as either masculine and feminine, which can be used about both men’s and women’s suicide. The

masculine suicide, she says, is the choice to die as a "heroic act in protest against individual or social wrongs", while the feminine suicide is simply when mental health issues is the cause of the suicide, implying that the suicide is a sign of weakness (Gentry, "Abstract"). Margaret Higonnet confirm Gentry's idea of suicide, and she defines female suicide this way:

For our fictions of women, suicidal disintegration far more often has to do with their sexual and amorous relationships. Traditionally, myths of female suicide have focused on two themes: defeated love and chastity. The insistent representation of women - rather than men - who commit suicide for love complements the familiar assumption that woman lives for love, man for himself. (Higonnet 108)

These critics distinguish between the social constructions of feminine and masculine suicides. The female suicide is seen as the result of the mental health issues caused mainly by love or lack of love, while the masculine suicide is a brave act of justice – a martyr for one's beliefs. However, both men and women can commit both masculine and feminine suicide.

Both *The Awakening* and *Looking for Alaska*'s agentic female characters suffers the same tragic destiny, and they eventually commit suicide. Their suicides differ severely, where Edna's suicide can be considered a "masculine suicide", and Alaska's suicide is more suitable for the category of "feminine suicide".

2.2 Literature and learning

2.2.1 Why literature?

At Utdanningsdirektoratet, it says that the interdisciplinary topics should give the students the opportunity to gain insight into challenges and dilemmas within the topic and that the students should be able to understand how we can collaborate into solutions. Taking this into consideration, one could assume that, in the English subject, literary discussion would be the natural place to facilitate learning within health and life skills. According to Utdanningsdirektoratet, health and life skills in the English subject should be "developing the ability of the pupils to express themselves in writing and orally in English", and this again should make the students capable of expressing their thoughts and feelings around their experiences and their reflections to other people. They also add that "[t]he ability to handle situations that require linguistic and cultural competence can give pupils a sense of achievement and help them develop a positive self-image and a secure identity" (Utdanningsdirektoratet,

“English ENG01-04: Interdisciplinary topics”). This is centred around mastering the English language, but the English subject is much more than that. In both lower- and upper secondary school, there are competence aims that involve literature. In lower secondary, it says that the students should be able to: “read, interpret and reflect on English-language fiction, including young people's literature”, and in upper secondary, it says that the students should be able to: “read, analyze and interpret fictional texts in English” (Utdanningsdirektoratet, “*Competence aims after Year 10*” and “*Competence aims after VGI*”). Despite that life and health skills in the English subject is focused on language skills, literature could be used to facilitate learning to the same degree, if not better.

The answers to why we should use literature in learning are many. Firstly, all reading in English can work as implicit learning. The students are assigned to read, but will improve their language skills while doing so, without even noticing. With health and life skills' goal to give insight into challenges and different dilemmas within the topic, reading works excellent for this purpose. When reading fictional texts, the students will be able to explore new identities and see different perspectives on life; they will be able to enter a different state of mind. When working with complex topics, such as those concerning health and life skills, it can be clever to use literature as a "third" or "safe" space (Carlsen 121). A third or safe space, as in a place to escape from the real world and a place where you can explore new ideas. Sensitive topics can be challenging to discuss, especially in the classroom. Using literature as an external source for discussion will create distance from the "real" world. It might contribute to a safer and less personal space for the students to convey their opinions. It is not only the ability to enter different states of mind that is important when reading fiction, but adolescents should also be able to recognize experiences and concerns of literature in realistic terms (Carlsen 130). This is all something both canonical fiction and YAF can offer, though in different ways. In my chosen novels, the students are entering two completely different states of mind, exploring the characters of Edna and Alaska. Edna is a determined and outspoken character that is healthy to identify with, and the author creates a safe space for young readers to enter and learn from. Alaska, on the other hand, is a miserable character without a voice, that could be unhealthy to identify with. Neither does the author create a safe space to enter, when the novel is sexualising women and romanticising depression.

2.2.2 Adolescent literature and touchy topics

YAF often has an open attitude towards engaging with the traumatic and challenging parts of life. The genre is often affected by realism, where the goal is for the plot to be perceived as the real world, with real people and real stories (James 73). A realistic and relatable depiction of the fictional universe will probably create a closer relationship between the adolescent and the story. One topic that is always difficult to approach in the classroom is death. The frequency of death in children's literature only started increasing from the period of 1970, so it is a relatively new topic. Why this is, James suggests, could be because bringing "children" and "death" together can seem very unsettling and uncomfortable (2). Lois Rauch Gibson and Laura M. Zaidman illustrate this point on death in YAF: "when a character dies, another learns a little more about how to live – to appreciate the gift of life even while mourning. The dying instructs the living about true priorities and the worth of each individual's life" (as cited in James 3). This is an idea that can help ease the brutality of death in favour of a positive outcome for the ones left behind, but it can also create a dangerous space where death is justified because of the positive outcome it has. In my analysis of *Looking for Alaska*, I will explain this idea further in connection with the death of Alaska. Another aspect around death, that we also get an insight on with Alaska, is that when a troubled or "different" character dies, it is difficult to avoid the assumption that the character died because of their actions, and for it to become a lesson for those who are left behind. Hacking claims that the "...representations of death can be seen, as well, to 'regulate' sexual behaviors, and to reinforce dominant ideas about sexuality and gender, a trend that is especially clear in narratives that construct particular sexual practices and behaviors as 'illicit'" (as cited in James 176). Many create depictions of death as a reason for development and growth, and some make death seem like a punishment for teenagers, then, especially girls, who "operate outside socially prescribed boundaries" (James 74). This is also something I will exemplify with the character of Alaska, when she is thoroughly criticised for her actions throughout the novel.

2.2.3 Canonical fiction vs. YAF

YAF and canonical fiction are both widespread in the secondary classroom. There are debates concerning which one is better, yet a combination can strengthen both, by using YAF to scaffold canonical literature according to Rybakova et al. (31). The characterization of YAF "refers to a story that arises during an adolescent's journey toward identity, a journey told through a distinctively teen voice that holds the same potential for literary value as its 'Grownup' peers"

(Stephens 41). Canonical fiction can be characterized by it being a "collection of classic literary texts that are distinguished by overall literary quality" and "worthy of study" (Cole 2008, as cited in Rybakova et al. 32). There are different advantages to both genres of literature. Canonical literature offers a more advanced and critical reading for the students, while YAF can motivate students, with issues concerning reading, to participate more by using relatable literature (Connors and Shepard 7).

The canon is already present in the secondary classroom and probably will be for some time, but YAF is more and more incorporated. Rybakova et al. suggests the "aesthetic pleasure of reading YAF with the more analytical reading of canonical texts" as the ultimate combination. The canon is given, but Rybakova et al. argues the importance of acknowledging controversial topics in YAF because, in the classroom, there will be situations concerning controversial topics and historical tragedies (34). Therefore, it is essential not to ignore the importance of YAF as well. Rybakova et al. emphasize that the combination of YAF and canonical fiction in the classroom can be an excellent tool for scaffolding. They explain how one can use Herz & Gallo's (2005) idea of *bridging*, where YAF is used as a connecting "bridge" to canonical fiction by a common "theme, plot, character, setting, or other similar element[s]" (Rybakova et al. 34). Ergo, by combining the two types of texts together in the classroom, the students will have the most significant learning outcome, and this is something I wish to illustrate with my chosen novels. By first introducing the canonical novel *The Awakening*, with its literary quality and obvious problematic patriarchal surrounding, the student will get an insight into how difficult it was to be a woman at the time, as well as how hard it was to be a woman with agency. Then, by introducing the YAF novel *Looking for Alaska*, the students will get a new perspective on the same topic, by using a relatable and quite different novel. They will then be able to see the importance of being critical of newer fiction and see how we are still affected by patriarchal values also today, though to a different degree with new issues.

2.3 Central terminology

Before moving on with my analysis, there are a few terms that are necessary to define for my study. First, we have the term *agency*. Agency is a common term often used in the context of feminist theory and mentioned regularly throughout my thesis. When reading about suppressed groups, such as women, agency is an important term that will often appear. According to Lois McNay, agency can instantly "appear to be a straightforward idea denoting the ability of

individuals to have some kind of transforming effect or impact on the world» (McNay 1) or, as Mary Bosworth suggested, be the idea of power and self-efficiency (Bosworth 3). There is a commonly known fact that some people have more agency than others, and among these with restricted agency is women. In so many ways, women have been denied societal agentic status over the times. Power is often associated with the question of freedom and constraint, and agency is, therefore, a helpful resource in broader issues such as this (McNay 1). I have included this term in my analysis because agency is a common characteristic of both my female characters, Edna and Alaska, yet the way their agency is responded to differs, which I will elaborate on in my analysis chapters.

Another term of relevance is *identification*. According to Cohen, «identification is a mechanism through which audience members experience reception and interpretation of the text from the inside as if the events were happening to them» (243). In other words, identification is how the reader relates to the text. In a qualitative study by Jessica Kokesh and Miglena Sternadori (2015), they claim that YA fiction is still portraying the classic femininity through heroines that are "clingy, insecure, and ever-dieting", and that this is problematic because of their discovery that young readers idolize and identify with their favourite characters. Young readers also tend to believe that the novel's content is equal to real life (Kokesh et al. 139). Most of the participants in the study would also use novels as guidance in different real-life situations (Kokesh et al. 154). Identification is important to my analysis because of my chosen characters problematic/unproblematic portrayal, and I will consider them healthy or not healthy to identify with for young readers.

Lastly, I will elaborate on the term *stereotyping* and its relevance to my thesis. According to John F. Dovidio, Nancy Evans & Richard B. Tyler, stereotypes can be seen as “cognitive structures that mediate the information processing involved in person perception” (23). That is, stereotypes are the assumptions one has that affect the way one perceives other people. When these stereotypical attitudes reach literature, is when they really start affecting readers. An example of this is how stereotypes often are “interrelated in the context of gender with the notion of agency in that they positively portray women who have limited agency and do not wish to expand it” (Kokesh et al. 141). In both my chosen novels I will consider different stereotypes. I will discuss the constructed stereotypes my chosen characters challenges, and which ones they create.

Further, I will use these terms to determine if the possible stereotypical narrative of my novels challenges the value of agency, when young adolescent readers experience identification to such a degree when reading literature. In my following two chapters I will elaborate on, and analyse, my two chosen novels. First, I will look at *The Awakening* in chapter 3, and then I will continue with *Looking for Alaska* in chapter 4. In both my chapters I will point out how the characters portray agency, how they are challenging and creating stereotypes, and why the characters are healthy or unhealthy to identify with for young readers.

3 *The Awakening*

In this chapter, I will investigate how the canonical novel *The Awakening* by Kate Chopin (1899) can be used to facilitate learning within the topic of health and life skills by looking at its relevant theme and how the female characters are healthy or unhealthy to identify with. In my next chapter I will consider the same thematic as here, but by using the modern best-selling YAF novel *Looking for Alaska*, instead. In this chapter, I will exemplify learning within health and life skills by looking at how the topics of gender roles and mental health go together in the novel, focusing mainly on the novel's female protagonist. I will do this by examining how the novel's protagonist embodies female agency, as well as how she is penalized by her surroundings because of her agency.

The Awakening “caused widespread controversy on publication in 1899 for its radical and ‘immoral’ depiction of female desire, adultery and the constraints of marriage and motherhood” (Kingsolver 294). If the novel was published today, the topics of the novel would probably not cause the same controversy as at the time of the release. However, many of its issues are still relevant today. Using canonical literature in the modern classroom can be challenging when some will consider it outdated or even boring. Using this novel, I wish to show how using canonical literature can be just as relevant and essential to use in the classroom, especially in connection with modern literature. Because adolescents tend to identify with the characters in the literature they read, *The Awakening* can provide the reader with a good example of a healthy protagonist to identify with. The novel allows for a safe third space to enter, despite its difficult topics. This becomes even more clear when seen in comparison with *Looking for Alaska* in chapter 3.

The Awakening's character of interest is the protagonist Edna Pontellier, whose life revolves around being a wife and a mother. She is a young woman that is very unhappy with her life and has, ever since she was a child, had an instinctive feeling to act out her disobedient thoughts. One summer, despite already being married with children, Edna falls into the devotion of a young man called Robert. Mesmerized by the new sensations this leads to, and influenced by the women around her, she begins the journey towards individuality and desire – unknowing of the consequences it will eventually have. Edna is an important character firstly because she rejects The Cult of True Womanhood ideals. At a time where everyone judged women by these confining ideals, she stands out as a strong woman that dare to diverge from the norm and take the consequences that follow. Edna gradually claims her agency in a society where this seems

unattainable, and she is penalized for this in several instances. Despite all the adversity Edna faces, she still experiences an awakening, a sexual one too, but the more important one is her mental awakening as she becomes an independent individual and manages to eliminate the dual life she has lived for so long. She becomes aware of her place in the world, her thoughts and emotions, and how she is perceived.

3.1 Gender roles

3.1.1 Men's attitudes

Edna is criticised on several instances by different men in the novel, but more than anyone, her own husband. His view, as every one of the other men in the novel, follows The Cult of True Womanhood ideals. Edna's husband, Mr. Pontellier, speaks about her as if she was something of his possession. He has clear expectations for her, and he would look at her such as "one looks at a valuable piece of personal property which has suffered some damage" (Chopin 4). Mr. Pontellier even describes her as "the sole object of his existence" (Chopin 12). It is clear to see that Mr. Pontellier believes that Edna is one of his belongings, equal to his wallet or his hat. As one does with one's belongings, Mr. Pontellier decides where Edna should be at any given time and how she should be presented: "I can't permit you to stay out here all night" (Chopin 76). The way he controls Edna penalizes her. He restricts her from "non-suitable" activities, and he even seeks to a doctor, behind her back, because he believes she "doesn't act well" (Chopin 162). Edna would, in the beginning of the novel, yield for his desires with an ease as "unthinkingly as we walk, move, sit [and] stand" (Chopin 76).

Mr. Pontellier does not only consider Edna as his personal property, but he sets clear standards for women's domesticity in general, which largely affects her. He speaks of a woman's duty as a matter of course, which sounds almost humorous: "If it was not a mother's place to look after children, whose on earth was it?" (Chopin 12) or that it was "strange that [a] woman hasn't learned yet to make a decent soup" (Chopin 127). Mr. Pontellier would also express his anger around Edna's "disregard for her duties as a wife" (Chopin 142). In other words, he would respond with great shock if a woman, including Edna, did not master every one of the skills he, and the rest of society, would associate with a mother-woman, which is Chopin's own term for a woman that would live for her husband, children, and home. Despite his determined mindset, all the women around Edna would declare him "the best husband in the world", considering all the gifts he would buy her (Chopin 17). This all suffocates Edna

because she is limited to a specific and narrow expectation of womanhood, and she is in no position to deny it or complain about it because she is so “lucky” with her husband.

Edna is on different occasions advised by several of the male characters in the novel, who so generously give out advice on- and to women. This quote exemplifies this in Edna’s first meeting with Madame Ratignolle’s husband after the summer: “he found her looking not so well as at Grand Isle, and he advised a tonic” (Chopin 139) or when her husband “[told] her she was not looking well and must take care of herself. She was unusually pale and very quiet” (Chopin 132). The men of the novel do not hold back when it came to advising Edna, she doesn’t even have to ask for their opinion to get it. The word “well” is commonly used by the male characters, whether it’s acting well or looking well, they would have the answer. Edna is penalized by the way the male characters share their expertise on women, it is never considered to ask a woman herself. Even a licenced doctor gives “helpful” advice on women, to Edna’s husband: “Woman, my dear friend, is a very peculiar and delicate organism... It would require an inspired psychologist to deal successfully with them” (Chopin 165). Even Edna’s own father gives his advice on women to Mr. Pontellier: “Authority, coercion are what is needed. Put your foot down good and hard; the only way to manage a wife”, which is disturbing concerning it is his own daughter he is talking about (Chopin 178).

3.1.2 The mother-woman

According to the socially constructed scale of femininity and masculinity, in the Bem Sex-Role Inventory mentioned in my introduction, Edna grows more and more masculine throughout the novel, and simultaneously she gains agency. It seems almost like her independence can be measured in a scale of femininity/masculinity. Even before Edna’s awakening, her hands are described as “strong, shapely hands”, which could symbolize that she already has potential for independence (Chopin 4). The term “handsome” is often associated with the masculine rather than the feminine characteristics, and the people around Edna start to see her as more handsome, as she starts claiming her independence. After she visited Grand Isle for the summer, and experienced what became the beginning of her awakening, people begin to notice her masculinity: “How handsome Mrs. Pontellier looked! ...[s]ome way she doesn’t seem like the same woman” (Chopin 152) or “she had never appeared handsomer (Chopin 212)”. With her masculine presentation Edna follows her intuition and breaks the feminine stereotype.

Edna has two choices, when it comes to whom she wants to be: the flawless mother-woman or the unpopular anti-mother-woman, the problem is that she does not fit into either one

of them. She faces a crossroad, where she must decide to either fully dedicate her life to be a mother and wife, or totally isolate herself from others and be the independent and unfriendly outcast. Her surrounding allows no in between. From the beginning of the novel, before her awakening, Edna is already described as “rather handsome than beautiful”, which can imply her distancing herself from the feminine stereotype (Chopin 7). Her body was described as “long, clean and symmetrical”, but also a body where the observer “might not cast a second glance upon the figure” (Chopin 35). This depiction of Edna can symbolize how she experiences herself in the middle of the two possible socially constructed categories of women: she is lean, clean, and symmetrical, such as the “perfect” feminine mother-woman would be, yet she also finds herself different with a body where no one would really notice her, such as the unpopular anti-mother-woman.

Edna meets two powerful women on her journey, who seems to be the embodiment of her two choices. First, we have Madame Ratignolle, whose “beauty was all there, flaming and apparent” (Chopin 19). She is described as the “embodiment of every womanly grace and charm” and would have a baby every second year, as one should (Chopin 19). She is Edna’s friend but makes it very clear, to other people, that they are not the same: “She [Edna] is not one of us; she is not like us” (Chopin 48). The second option is Mademoiselle Reiz, who is described as “The most disagreeable and unpopular woman who ever lived in Bienville Street” (Chopin 146). She is “no longer young” with her “small weazened face and body and eyes that glowed. She has absolutely no taste in dress...” (Chopin 60-61). She sees herself as an artist and would tell Edna about all the gifts an artist must possess and that “to succeed, the artist must possess the courageous soul” (Chopin 158). Edna experiences much pressure from both sides. She would not like to be like Madame Ratignolle because it confines her, but she wouldn’t want to be like Mademoiselle Reiz either. The only independent woman in the novel, Mademoiselle Reiz, was characterized in such a negative way. It might symbolize that the tough journey towards individuality could end up ruining you, something Edna did not want either. In the end, it seemed like there were no in between. By including two polar opposite characters such as Madame Ratignolle and Mademoiselle Reiz, the author seems to illustrate the very few options that women had at the time, which is confirmed by Edna not fitting into neither.

The mother-woman is commensurate with The Cult of True Womanhood woman, and Edna is breaking this stereotype. The Cult of True Womanhood woman is pure, pious, domestic, and submissive. Edna herself does not relate to this ideal. She even describes herself as “a devilishly wicked specimen of the sex” (Chopin 206). She is firstly, not to be considered pure.

She is unfaithful to her husband, both with her romantic affair with Robert, and physically with kissing Arobin. She also expresses sexual desire, which is seen as “unwomanly” in *The Cult of True Womanhood*. Edna is neither pious, when she reveals that she, in her younger days, “was running away from prayers, from the Presbyterian service, read in a spirit of gloom by [her] father that chills [her] yet to think of” (Chopin 39). Edna does also rebel against the given domestic tasks of a woman. She shares that she is glad whenever her children left, even though she was ashamed of it: “She did not miss them... their absence was a sort of relief, though she did not admit this, even to herself (Chopin 45)”. She even decides to buy her own apartment, because the old house came from money that were not hers. Finally, after her awakening Edna is not submissive, not anymore. She becomes independent and even speaks back to her husband: “Don’t speak to me like that again; I shall not answer you” (Chopin 77).

3.1.3 Sexuality

Before her awakening, Edna had never experienced passion or lust. She is married with children, but still she has never felt a single tingle in her body during the relationship with her husband. What Edna had mistaken for being a feeling of fancy was that “there was a sympathy of thought and taste between them” (Chopin 43). However, she does admit that she “grew” fond of Mr. Pontellier, though there were “no trace of passion or excessive and fictitious warmth [that] colored her affection” (Chopin 44). She spoke of their marriage as simply an “accident” when Mr. Pontellier fell in love with her, such as “men are in the habit of doing” (Chopin 43). This quote describe love as a one-sided affair, where men are the only ones agentic enough to decide who they wish to fall in love with. As a woman, Edna is in no place to choose who she falls in love with, especially in no place to terminate a marriage. The relationship between Mrs. and Mr. Pontellier becomes more and more distant and debilitating, leaving Edna in a catch-22 as she is supposed to be the obedient part of the relationship.

According to Cynthia Griffin Wolff (1996) Chopin created (with *The Awakening*) a “powerful (and thus threatening) discourse for feminine sexuality”, considering its portrayal of adultery and female lust (18). At Grand Isle, Edna discovers what desire should feel like for the first time in her adult life, meeting Robert. He is younger, handsome, and tended to always accompany one of the married ladies throughout the summer. This summer it was Edna. Edna knew this and would not think too much about it in the beginning, he was good company if anything. Their relation continued to develop, and the tension escalated. He would look at her with a “glance which had penetrated to the sleeping places of her soul and awakened them”

(Chopin 245). Their relationship is never physical, but their emotional connection is the opposite of what she felt for her husband, Robert's voice was "musical and true" (Chopin 100). Their relationship might participate in her awakening, but for them it seems like an impossible partnership, and Robert ran away to Mexico to stop it. As Robert left, Edna realizes that it somehow had taken "the brightness, the color, the meaning out of everything" (Chopin 113). Without Robert, Edna is drawn to a similar desire once again.

After Robert's departure Edna meets the charming Alcee Arobin who eventually gives her "the first kiss of her life to which her nature had really responded. It was a flaming torch that kindled desire" (Chopin 208). After the excitement of her flirt with Robert, Edna is enlightened and on the look for that same feeling. After meeting Arobin, she slowly grows more comfortable with her own lust. She is unfaithful to her husband with Arobin as well, but it is a different feeling. Edna experiences that it is "not the kiss of love which had inflamed her, because it was not love which had held this cup of life to her lips", it was sexual desire (Chopin 210). Edna is fully aware of what she is doing, and she even cries the night after Arobin left after their kiss. She feels irresponsible and guilty, but also enlightened as if she finally can see for the first time. After instinctively kissing Arobin, she realizes "the significance of life, the monster made up for beauty and brutality" (Chopin 209). After her relationship with both Robert and Arobin, Edna discovers both desire and devotion, as well as the bitter reality that she cannot have it.

Even Robert, the only person Edna wants by her side, penalizes her for following her heart. Robert's departure is the final downfall before Edna commits suicide. After he finally returns from Mexico and they are reunited once again, Edna feels the most joyous bliss. She went out for only a little while and then she returns to his note: "I love you. Good-bye – because I love you" (Chopin 282). Robert left her, again, because he himself, as a white privileged man, believes there is no way for their love to proceed: "I couldn't help loving you if you were ten times his wife; but so long as I went away from you and kept away I could help telling you so" (Chopin 270). Edna tries to persuade him with her speech about having claimed her own independence and that Mr. Pontellier has nothing to say about her freedom, but he was not to change his mind. Wolff (1996) suggested that what Robert wants is the life of confinements that Edna so desperately wants to flee: "[s]he wants a new paradigm; he merely wants to rearrange the actors of the old one" (17). I agree that it appears that Robert wishes to switch places with Mr. Pontellier and be her husband as well. He seems to be a more open-minded person and might not "imprison" Edna the way her husband does. I would argue this based on Robert's respect for Edna's marriage, where he sees it impossible to escape despite Edna

declaring herself her own master. If Robert really wishes Edna to be free, would he not forget all about her marriage and be with her, despite her marriage? If Edna was to be with Robert, and marry him, she would still be met with expectations from society and everyone around her. What Edna wants is to be free of all judgment and expectations, but Robert lives in the restrictive society as well. Edna is then again left all alone struggling for her independence, with no one by her side, not even her beloved Robert.

3.1.4 Motherhood

Edna challenges the mother-woman stereotype, which is the ideal the most successful women fit into in the novel. The mother woman comes from the conservative perspective that worships the women who “idealized their children, worshipped their husbands, and esteemed it a holy privilege to efface themselves as individuals and grow wings as ministering angels” (Chopin 19). Edna is early in the novel described as “not a mother-woman” (Chopin 19). Edna’s thoughts around motherhood can be considered controversial for some people, even today. She says: “I would give my money, I would give my life for my children; but I wouldn’t give myself” (Chopin 117). In other words, Edna does not idolize her children such as the mother-woman would. She is a realist and understands the importance of individuality. Edna does not treat her children badly in any way. The novel describes her love for them like this: “She was fond of her children in an uneven, impulsive way. She would sometimes gather them passionately to her heart; she would sometimes forget them” (Chopin 44). She loves her children with all her heart, but she would also focus on loving herself occasionally.

Edna is though penalized for not devoting her whole life to her children. Everyone around her keep telling her that it is all about the children. Adele, the ultimate mother-woman, even uses her last breath to remind Edna on her death bed: “Think of the children, Edna. Oh think of the children! Remember them!” (Chopin 277). Even her own husband believes she is failing her duties as a mother. For example, when Mr. Pontellier came home drunk and woke up the children and they started to cry, he informs Edna that “Raoul had a high fever and needed looking after” and he aggressively accuses her with “inattention” and “habitual neglect of the children” (Chopin 12). Because she does not idolize her children, such as the mother-women are expected to do, and because of her husband’s ignorance, Edna is labelled a bad mother.

3.2 Mental health

3.2.1 The awakening

As Edna experiments with different relationships and start to act as she likes, she has not only a sexual- but a mental awakening as well. As Wolff (1996) put it, *The Awakening* is “not...a story of female affirmation, but rather an excruciatingly exact dissection of the ways in which society distorts a woman’s true nature”, and Edna starts to understand this societal issue (18). After all this time, she begins to realize her “position in the universe as a human being” and she recognises her “relations as an individual to the world within and about her” (Chopin 21). Up until this point she has lived a so called “dual life”, where she keeps her thoughts and feelings inside. She has lived all her life as some sort of doll, but now she “began to look with her own eyes; to see and to apprehend the deeper undercurrents of life” (Chopin 235). Edna is tired of the expectations for women, that they were supposed to be like dolls; look pretty, not think themselves, or learn to know themselves. Edna merges her two selves, the one on the inside and the one on the outside. Even before she is anywhere close to where she wants to be, she is dependent: “...I know I shall like it, like the feeling of freedom and independence” (Chopin 198).

Edna manages to erase her dual life and become a consistent person she identifies with herself, yet it is not enough for Edna. She still has to claim her own individuality, to clear all submissiveness and to become self-reliant: “I am no longer one of Mr. Pontellier’s possessions to dispose of or not. I give myself where I choose” (Chopin 271). On her way to becoming agent in her own life, she mentally, and physically, separates herself from Mr. Pontellier, and she also starts reflecting about women’s position in the world: “...we women learn so little of life on the whole” (Chopin 268). Edna is aware that her situation does not apply to only her, but every woman everywhere. When Mr. Pontellier goes to see a doctor concerning Edna’s new way of life, he expresses his concern about her questions about women and independence: “She’s got some sort of notion in her head concerning the eternal rights of women ...” (Chopin 163). As we can see, a woman asking questions and caring for woman’s right, is considered questionable behaviour, but Edna does not care.

3.2.2 The downfall

Edna does go through an enlightening awakening, develops as an individual, and is penalized for it, but she also penalizes herself. She enjoys her new lifestyle as a freer individual, but she would experience sudden strikes of antagonism: “Edna began to feel like one who awakens

gradually out of a dream, a delicious, grotesque, impossible dream, to feel again the realities pressing into her soul” (Chopin 78). She would sometimes forget the existence of the confining society she has to endure, although, when the melancholic reality hit her, she has nowhere to share her dissatisfaction. When she is looking into her troublesome thoughts and emotions, she thinks that “[t]hey belonged to her and were her own”, they were nothing for others to know (Chopin 117). Edna shares her thoughts expressing her self-worth and how she enjoys her independence gladly, but she would hide her insecurities and her depressive thoughts from everyone around her. All alone, Edna feels like “life [is] passing by, leaving its promise broken and unfulfilled” (Chopin 183).

3.2.3 Edna’s suicide

The Awakenings final scene is Edna committing suicide, which is a particularly discussed scene, that Chopin received much criticism for. The ending “pleased neither the conservatives of the 1890s nor the liberals of the 1990s, because the former did not see Edna's death as penitent but defiant and the latter do not see it as necessary at all” (Gentry 35). In the journal of *American Literary Realism* (2016) Molly J. Hildebrand claim that “Edna seeks the total freedom she associates with white, upper middle-class men” and that it is the fact that it “remain[s] unavailable to her [that] prompts her unpremeditated suicide” (190). This interpretation says, in other words, that it is the sudden realization that Edna will never be as free as a man of her class that drives her to committing suicide. If we take Higonnet’s theory (1985) about the social constructs of masculine/feminine suicide in literature into consideration, as mentioned in the theory chapter, does Edna live for love, or for herself? Edna sure seems to believe her life revolves around loving and pleasing others, which she believes she could not manage to do. She does not want to dedicate her whole life to be the perfect wife or mother, or to be the ultimate mother-woman that would always behave appropriately. Edna even tries to live for herself, to put herself first, but she realizes it is not possible: “To-day it is Arobin; to-morrow it will be some one else. It makes no difference to me, it doesn’t matter about Leonce Pontellier – but Raoul and Etienne!” (Chopin 287). There would always be men in her life that she would live for and compare herself to. She realizes that she would never be able to live side by side with a man in equality, every man around her would be above her – even the man she loves, her own husband, and her own children.

At first, Edna’s suicide might seem to belong to the category of the stereotypical feminine suicide that is driven by mental illness and miserable love only, because her suicide

is greatly driven by emotions. However, I would argue that Edna's suicide also belongs in the category of masculine suicide which is suicide as a "heroic act of protest against individual or social wrongs" (Gentry, Abstract). Edna's mental illness is triggered by the confinements of being a woman. She must keep her feelings and thoughts on the inside, she has to obey all men, she was expected to live and behave a certain way, and she was like a personal doll for her husband. When Edna realizes she cannot have an independent life where she decides on her own, she is broken and angry. At the same time, she feels at peace when she enters the sea to end her life. If she cannot live for herself, then she will rather not live.

Death is a difficult topic in itself, and then maybe especially in the classroom with children involved. I believe there is no given way that is the correct way to speak about death in the classroom. The most important factor is to create a safe space for discussion, where it does not get too personal and scary. Here I believe literature can be a great resource for creating that distance. Death is a difficult matter to address no matter how you twist it. However, in *The Awakening*, the attention is drawn to the problematic society around the character, and not her insecurities and "flaws". Most importantly, Edna has her own voice and her death is not romanticised.

3.3 Conclusion

The Awakening contains many resources to facilitate learning within health and life skills. Firstly, the novel is full of difficult dilemmas and happenings where the topic of gender roles and mental health intertwine. The novels discuss issues such as patriarchal values, challenging different feminine stereotypes and confining ideals, mental and sexual awakening, as well as mental health issues, and suicide as rebellion against the patriarchy. I have also considered Edna as a healthy character to identify with for young readers. Altogether, Edna comes forward as a very agentic woman, yet she is penalized for her agency by her surroundings. As a character that young adults identify with, I believe Edna is a healthy character, healthier than Alaska in Green's novel, which I will discuss in the next chapter. Chopin has created an environment where the patriarchal values are seen as the villain, and Edna a feminist heroine. Despite the novel's canonical status, it is a novel that is just as relevant in the 21st century as in the late 1800s. The novel is great alone in the classroom, but when it is read side by side with a YAF novel with a similar theme, here *Looking for Alaska*, I believe it will serve an even better purpose, when the students use the latter as a connecting "bridge" where they gain new and

more relevant perspectives on what they have just read. This, I will elaborate on further in the next chapter.

4 *Looking for Alaska*

In this chapter, I will investigate how the YAF novel *Looking for Alaska* by John Green (2005) can be used to facilitate learning within the topic of health and life skills. I will exemplify learning within health and life skills by looking into similar topics as I did in the last chapter and consider how gender and mental health intertwine in the novel. I will focus mainly on a female character, which is not the narrator or protagonist of the novel, but a strong side character. I will look at how this character portrays female agency, as well as how she is penalized by the author by portraying her as a sexualized character without a voice, whose death is justified by the other characters benefit, unlike in *The Awakening*.

Kathryn James suggests that the reason for the lack of academic analysis around the subject of death in children's literature is because "the very act of bringing 'death' and 'children' together is unsettling", and there might be some truth to that especially for children themselves (2). Death is a challenging yet very important topic; it is often avoided as a taboo. In that case, it can create distance between the expectations and reality, which will make the unavoidable meeting with death a much more scary and foreign experience. When using novels with fictional characters and fictional events, one can create a safe space, which is not too serious, where it is easier for students to participate in an objective discussion. Using YAF in the classroom can be a way for the students to identify and engage in reading and reflect on and around complex topics. Using this novel, I hope to show how YAL can be used in the classroom as a source for criticism, especially in contrast to canonical fiction.

Looking for Alaska follows the narrative of the teenager Pudge, yet the character that appears the most remarkable is his new friend Alaska, whom he falls deeply in love with. I have chosen to focus mainly on Alaska's character and not the protagonist for this MA. I decided to do this because Alaska is a very complex and controversial character who is penalized throughout the novel and unaccounted for. Alaska is not only the beautiful, intelligent, and stubborn minor character but maybe the most troubled and debatable character in the novel. The novel's narrative follows the characters before and after the incident of Alaska's suicide, and most of the events both before and after the novel are influenced by her. Alaska is the one to break the stereotypes, ask the big questions, and the one that struggles the most throughout the novel, which is the reason that she will be the main interest of discussion here. Because Alaska is unaccounted for and does not get to have a voice to defend herself, I believe she is confined. It is at her expense the other characters attain the possibility to develop.

Looking for Alaska can be considered a popular book with its rating of 3,9/5 on Goodreads and winner of the 2006 Michael L. Printz Award, which is an award that “honors the best book written for teens, based entirely on its literary merit” (ALA). It is a novel that is “taught in many high school and college curricula and has been published in over 30 languages” (Johngreenbooks). The book is mostly positively reviewed; however, in my interpretation, I will read the novel more critically than other have done.

When adolescents tend to identify with the characters in literature more than adults, I believe *Looking for Alaska* is vital to discuss and be critical of. Because of the novel's popularity and all-around positive reputation, it is easy to read the novel without any second thoughts. Neither Alaska nor Pudge are healthy characters to identify with, considering Pudge's sexualization of women and the romanization of Alaska's suffering. This novel can, in some ways, be of unfavourable influence on the safe third space YAL is supposed to offer. However, if teachers engage in critical discussion with students and show them the issues of the novel, students can hopefully understand the recurring gender issues in our society today.

4.1 Gender roles

4.1.1 The sexual character of Alaska

Alaska challenges the stereotype of the good-looking dumb girl but again creates a new stereotype. Like so many romanticized side characters, Alaska is described as utterly beautiful. Similar to the stereotypical “beauty standard”, Alaska has the “typical” feminine romanticized features being short, curvy, and big breasted. Unlike the good-looking dumb girl, Alaska is not naïve and ignorant; she is self-reflective, stubborn, and clever, unlike the stereotypical depictions of pretty girls. However, Alaska is also severely depressed and is, to some degree, dangerous for herself: “Pudge, what you must understand about me is that I am a deeply unhappy person” (Green 150). She has a fake ID, she smokes, she drinks a lot, and she would also drive recklessly: “she gripped the steering wheel tight as we accelerated and she waited until the last possible moment to break, just before we reached the bottom of the hill” (Green 115). Despite author John Green's creation of this “new” character, he might have created a new stereotype of the bright yet miserable pretty girl.

Alaska’s character is hypersexualized from beginning to end. From the beginning of the novel, the depictions of Alaska immediately create a specific impression of her. She is first introduced through the eyes of the main character, and he is astonished by her looks: “I barely

heard him because the hottest girl in all of human history was standing before me in cut-off jeans and a peach tank top" (Green 22). This is the way Alaska's depictions continue throughout the novel. Every time her looks are commented on, she is described as a heavenly feminine goddess, and everything she wears becomes sexy. Pudge seems to be so mesmerized by her that he loses focus every time he speaks to her:

It was right then [...] that I realized the importance of curves, of the thousand times where girls' bodies ease from one place to another, from arc of the foot to ankle to calf, from calf to hip to waist to breast to neck to ski-slope nose to forehead to shoulder to the concave arch of the back... I'd noticed curves before, of course, but I had never quite apprehended their significance (Green 27-28).

When the author chooses to make the male protagonist sexualize another female character to such a degree, it draws the focus onto the "importance" of Alaska's beauty and Alaska's personality, how smart she is, how funny, how brave, and outspoken she is, is insignificant. Pudge is rarely mesmerized by her personality in the same way he is by her looks. This exemplifies Threadcraft's theory of embodiment, and the way women work as an "ornamental surface for the male gaze" (1). Alaska is restricted to a pretty face and a pretty body, in the perspective of Pudge. To sexualize a character to such a degree creates an appearance-based standard that will be very difficult for young girls to strive for. Alaska's character might challenge the stereotype of the attractive dumb girl. However, the novel's hyper-sexualization of Alaska creates another beauty standard for the pretty and rebellious girl. The novel's way of focusing on a character's looks to such a degree turns Alaska to an object.

Pudge, the main character and narrator, is very sexist in his relationship with girls, which is problematic because it is not an issue that is handled in the novel. Pudge is a good main character and role model, considering that he is challenging the masculine stereotype, such as Bem put it in the The Bem Sex-Role Inventory. Unlike the masculine desired traits, being dominant and able to defend one's own beliefs, Pudge is shy and awkward. He is skinny looking, he hates sports, avoids conflict at all costs, and does not stand up for himself when he is bullied or forced to pay for the cigarettes for his friends. Pudge is also presented as a very clever boy, but his understanding of girls seems quite limited, which is an issue. He comes forth as a very hormonal and horny teenage boy who sees sex in almost everything; it is almost as if he forgets that girls are human beings such as himself. Pudge is passionate about last words, but he is even more passionate about Alaska, then primarily sexually: "she sat down on my bed,

her butt against my hip. Her underwear, her jeans, the comforter, my corduroys and my boxers between us", Pudge comments about Alaska (Green 93). These types of thoughts constantly return through the novel: "her sizable cleavage clearly visible, it is a plain fact of human physiology that it becomes impossible to join in her clover search" (Green 53). Even after Alaska is dead, Pudge dreams of her flying into his room naked. It is though not only Alaska that is sexualized, but also almost every single female character that crossed his path. Even in the strangest situations, he sexualizes girls: "And then I leaned forward and threw up on to Lara's pants. [...] towards her jeans – a nice, butt-flattering pair of jeans" (Green 80). The author has created a likable main character that appears to be an underdog but has extremely sexist attitudes. This is absolutely suffocating for Alaska, when her problematic character is considered a threat and becomes omitted in favour of his unaddressed problematic behaviour.

Pudge is hopelessly in love with Alaska, but he seems to have chosen to ignore the reality and instead idolizes her. Pudge's love for Alaska appears to be drawn to the fact that she is not like the feminine submissive stereotype, yet still good looking: "I stared, stunned partly by the force of the voice emanating from the petite (but, God, curvy) girl" (Green 22). Alaska confront Pudge with him only liking the idea of her, which Alaska herself sees very clearly: "Don't you know who you love, Pudge? You love the girl who makes you laugh and shows you porn and drinks wine with you. You don't love the crazy, sullen bitch" and to which Pudge thinks: "there was something to that, truth to be told" (Green 118). Pudge admits not loving Alaska for her flaws. This also exemplify embodiment in the way Alaska is restricted to the subjectivity of Pudge's mind. Tragically, he loves his own idealization of her, not her, and Alaska understands that Pudge romanticizes her.

4.1.2 The Cult of True Womanhood

In "The Rise and Fall of Stereotypes in *Looking for Alaska*", Alina Zabolotico empathizes the problematic position one is put in when reading books with characters such as Alaska. She compares the new stereotype of "the elusive and coveted female consumed with self-hate", such as in *Looking for Alaska*, with the conservative ideal of The Cult of True Womanhood-woman and argues how this can be even more destructive for young readers (Zabolotico 2). As mentioned in the previous chapter, the Cult of True Womanhood meant that a woman should be judged by piety, purity, submissiveness, and domesticity, where Alaska scores low on all of them. On many levels, Alaska is challenging the stereotype of The Cult of True Womanhood through female rebellion.

The Cult of True Womanhood ideal says that women should be pure and that they should not give in to a man that could "take liberties incompatible with her delicacy", and Alaska is just the opposite of this (Welter 155). Alaska is sexually active and open about it. Her openness around sex is described in comparison with the school's drug dealer: "He loves weed like Alaska loves sex" (Green 59). Alaska is also against the norms of sex between men and women, especially in pornography, which she expresses to Pudge when they watches porn together: "They just don't make sex look fun for women. The girl is just an object" (Green 108). The point might be even more exaggerated when her friends explain (about her boyfriend) that "she hasn't cheated on him, which is a first" (Green 31). When Pudge and his girlfriend Lara struggle with sex, they contact Alaska, who shows them with confidence how it is done: "She laughed until she cried. She walked into the bathroom, returned with a tube of toothpaste, and showed us. In detail" (Green 155). Alaska is in no way the ideal of a "pure" woman; she is confident and comfortable with her own sexuality.

The idea of women being submissive is also a big part of The Cult of True Womanhood ideal. Alaska is not submissive at all, maybe even the other way around. She does not treat her male friends with exaggerated respect or care, and Pudge describes her as "a girl who treats you like you're ten" (Green 43). She is neither in no need of a so-called male "protector," and she stands up for and protects her own friends: "I'm sorry, but that's bullshit. You can't just throw him out of class", Alaska protests in defence of Pudge (Green 52). The submissive women would also have a "head almost too small for intellect", which Alaska most certainly does not have. She is clever, loves reading books, and would reflect on so many aspects of life. She would even comment on her friend's unknowingness: "You poor, illiterate boy" (Green 105). Alaska would not let any man, or any woman, rise above her.

According to The Cult of True Womanhood, domesticity is the final and maybe most worshipped quality a woman could have. Alaska is in no way planning on a life dedicated to caring for a home. Already at a young age, when she is allowed to choose her own name, she wants to be named Alaska because it is "big, just like [she] wanted to be" (Green 67). Alaska is ambitious and wants to accomplish something with her life; what that will be, she is not sure of, but it will be extraordinary. Alaska's thoughts for the future are individualistic: "But there is so much to do: cigarettes to smoke, sex to have, swings to swing on. I'll have more time for reading when I'm old and boring". None of her future plans involved anyone else, especially not a husband for her to care for (Green 28).

4.1.3 Feminism

Alaska is an active feminist, despite her young age. She does seem to be living in an extremely sexist environment, and based on this, she must put up a fight at times:

“She [Lara] has great breasts,” the Colonel said without looking up from the whale [book].

“DO NOT OBJECTIFY WOMEN’S BODIES!” Alaska shouted.

Now he looked up. “Sorry, Perky breast.”

“That’s not any better!”

“Sure it is,” he said. “*Great* is a judgement of a woman’s body. *Perky* is merely an observation. They *are* perky. I mean, Christ.” (Green 75).

The quote above exemplifies the types of conversations Alaska must put up on a daily basis in her friend group consisting of only boys and herself. The boys sexualize and criticize other girls commonly, and Alaska continues her attempt to enlighten them. She also becomes upset with other females, emphasizing how women should stay together: “No woman should ever lie about another woman! You’ve violated the sacred covenant between women! How will stabbing one another in the back help women to rise above patriarchal oppression?!” (Green 82). Alaska is a raging feminist and has no intent to hide it.

Alaska’s feminism can appear exaggerated and creates an unrealistic stereotype of the modern feminist, which could provide negative associations with feminism. Just as in her depictions, Alaska appears confident, fearless, and flirty when speaking: “My ID blows. But I’ll flirt my way through” (Green 115). She aggressively throws out feminist comments about women’s rights, which can almost be seen as a parody of the feminist woman: “You’re not going to impose the patriarchal paradigm on me”, Alaska shouts out when asked to iron (Green 46). When cooking, “She said it was sexist to leave the cooking to the women, but better to have good sexist food than crappy boy-prepared food” (Green 112). It can appear exaggerated because she brings feminism into small unrelated scenarios, such as ironing, cooking, or even rapping. Feminists have been criticized and generalized because of how feminism has been portrayed in media. The image of feminism has gone from women being equal to men to women being superior to men, which is the message the feminism in *Looking for Alaska* could, to some

degree, have. A feminist fights for gender equality, if the term is associated with something else, it would rather encourage gender bias. Young girls cheering for woman's rights should be praised, not mocked. The topic of feminism is important – exaggerated or not, but the author mocks Alaska and feminists in general by creating this parody of a feminist. In addition to that, the novel kills the “impossible feminist girl”, which sends a message that highlights her impossibility in society.

The author has created a patriarchal environment of toxic masculinity, which penalizes Alaska as a feminist. Firstly, it is not only Alaska who is sexualized and criticized by her friends, but many other females as well. Almost all the females are firstly introduced with how beautiful, sexy, or cute they are. They are described as “a cute sophomore girl...” (Green 65), or that “she has nice breasts” (Green 75). If the male characters discussed the girls' personalities, it was because they had been such “bitches”, a term they would use if they didn't behave as usual. It is though not only in relation to girls, the boys execute this behaviour with each other. The way they talk to each other is very arrogant and insolent: “you harmless skinny bastard” (Green 83), The Colonel says to Pudge, and Pudge says that “I laughed at the idea that a guy as short and dorky as the Colonel could have a rap name” (Green 56). They often use negative comments about each other's appearance for fun. Whether or not this is a reflection of their insecurities, or a defensive mechanism is difficult to say. Still, their insolent behaviour reflects their treatment of women.

4.2 Mental health

Alaska is a very tough and vulnerable character who behaves the way she feels, yet the author criticised her for not living up to the male expectations. “... I'd certainly had enough of her unpredictability - cold one day, sweet the next; irresistibly flirty one moment, resistibly obnoxious the next”, Pudge complains about Alaska (Green 93). The author has created a sphere where the male characters seem to decide how the females should act, yet it never applies to the male characters. The expectations are made for females and spoken through the male characters. In short, females should be sweet, flirty, and predictable. If they are incoherent, they are unpredictable and unreasonable. If they were to have a bad day or act out of the ordinary, the female characters are repetitively called ‘*bitches*’: “she was such a bitch last night” (Green 41). The author creates negative associations with this shift in emotions with not only name-calling but also with the fact that Alaska's friends admit they sometimes don't like her because of it. When describing Alaska to Pudge, The Colonel says: “By my count, there are ninety-two

girls at this school and every last one of them is less crazy than Alaska” (Green 31). Alaska dares to be emotional and does not live a so-called “dual life” and she is agentic in that way. However, she is directly called crazy for not acting the way her male friends expect her to. Standing up for oneself should not be criticized. Dealing with one’s thoughts should be encouraged rather than shut down. The author’s way of criticizing this emotional freedom can very much affect young readers, especially when several male characters are criticizing one single female character.

Alaska is reflective and knowledgeable in her interpretation of life using the metaphor of the labyrinth. The labyrinth is a repetitive reference that is discussed throughout the novel. Alaska first introduces the labyrinth and shares that Simon Bolivar’s last words were: “How will I ever get out of this labyrinth?” (Green 27). Alaska and Pudge further discuss this question throughout the novel: “You spend your whole life stuck in the labyrinth, thinking about how you’ll escape it one day, and how awesome it will be, and imagining that future keeps you going, but you never do it. You use the future to escape the present”, says Alaska (Green 69). Already early in the novel, Alaska reveals that she believes that there is no way out of the labyrinth, and she morbidly adds that:

“It is not life and death, the labyrinth.”

“Um, OK. So what is it?”

“Suffering,” she said. “Doing wrong and having wrong things happen to you. That’s the problem. Bolivar was talking about the pain, not about living and dying. How do you get out of the labyrinth of suffering?” (Green 101).

Alaska’s reflection of the labyrinth shows that she has high agency and is deliberate in her reflection of life. She is self-aware, despite the unfortunate realization of her melancholy ideas of life. Her idea of suffering is similar to Edna’s idea of her life. She seems to be in an endless labyrinth of suffering as well, and just like Alaska, her solution was to go “straight and fast” to escape it.

Alaska is tragically “acting out”, yet none of her friends, or others around, take her seriously. Acting out means to: “behave badly because you are unhappy or upset, often in ways that you are not aware of” (“Act Out”). Especially in her way of speech, Alaska was very vulgar, and she would say morbid things as if it was a matter of nothing. For example, she speaks of death with such ease: “Y’all smoke to enjoy it. I smoke to die” (Green 57). The same applies when she talks about life and how she normalizes suffering: “But there’s always suffering,

Pudge. Homework or malaria or having a boyfriend who lives far away when there's a good-looking boy lying next to you", she seems to have accepted that life would be full of suffering no matter what (Green 102). Alaska would also do things out of the ordinary, that would cause worry, such as drink alcohol in the morning: "Alaska looked like a train wreck, but insisted on pouring the last few sips of Strawberry Hill [wine] into her cold instant coffee" (Green 150). Considering Alaska from this perspective, her self-defeating actions seems like a desperate scream for help. Her friends notice her abnormal behaviour, yet they chose to not take it seriously.

Alaska's death is a tragic incident which affects everyone around her, and the novel focuses greatly on how students can cope with the loss of a dear friend, however, this might dangerously romanticize female suffering as a mysterious dead-end instead of showing a way out of it. Alaska is a strong female character with a lot of agency, who also can be vulnerable about her mental health issues and, in that way, be considered a healthy role model. Alaska's problems appear real and relatable, but the way she is portrayed makes it seem like a desirable way of appearance, like a romanization of female suffering. Being depressed and suicidal should not be associated with being sexy, which can create a dangerous ideal for young readers. This quote, for instance, dangerously romanticizes death: "I may die young" she said, "but at least I'll die smart" (Green 66). The novel represents the topic of dealing with your thoughts, feelings, and mental health in general, but when the only way out of it becomes "straight and fast", as Alaska put it, the other positive aspects are gone to waste (Green 186).

However, the biggest issue is that Alaska's character has to die for Pudge to learn his "lesson". Making a troubled and vulnerable character die makes Alaska a dangerous role model. It is not her good qualities that make her an unhealthy role model; it is the author killing her. Her death is almost justified, on behalf of Pudge learning a life lesson:

The silence broke: "Sometimes I liked it," I said. "Sometimes I liked that she was dead."

"You mean it felt good?"

"No. I don't know. It felt...pure."

"Yeah," he said, dropping his usual eloquence. "Yeah. I know. Me too. It's natural. I mean, it must be natural." (Green 253).

The above excerpt is followed by this quote, which became very popular among the novel's fans: "It always shocked me when I realized that I wasn't the only person in the world who thought and felt such strange and awful things." (Green 253). Such as James's theory on death and children, as mentioned in the theory, put it: "when a character dies, another learns a little more about how to live". Alaska is dead, and the male characters agree that her death was "pure" and "natural", and Pudge learns this lesson that sometimes it is "okay" to think "bad" things, that it is human. It absolutely is a helpful and important lesson; the problem is that it is taught at the expense of Alaska's life. The sexist main character Pudge can live an enlightened life, while the troubled helpless Alaska must die.

4.2.1 Alaska's suicide

Alaska's suicide is the main event, which the novel's narrative revolves around, and it can be characterized as a feminine suicide, according to Higonnet's theory (1985). Not only is Alaska's emotionally unstable character unimportant and unjustified, but her suicide is also portrayed as a typical feminine suicide, despite her feminist characteristics. Alaska appears to be intended to be a strong female character, but when her death becomes a minor incident justified out of nothing, it penalizes her. Alaska can exemplify Kathryn James's idea of the typical YAF death as a punishment for teenagers, and then especially for girls who "operate outside socially prescribed boundaries" (74). Alaska seems to be killed as a punishment for being different than the norm, and it could participate with that young readers could develop negative associations with being agentic like Alaska. Her suicide is nothing like a "heroic act in protest against individual or social wrongs", which seems very out of character (Gentry, "Abstract"). Her suicide is the result of a fragile mental health. Zabolotico suggest that the novel gives the «impression that committing suicide, or any amount of self-harm, is alright as long as friends are there to glorify it and idolize one's memory as a reward for their suffering», which create a very dangerous ideal (6). Alaska does not live for herself, she blames herself for everything that goes wrong: "I don't even trust me...I have guts, just not when it counts" (Green 117). Through Pudge's eyes, we get further insight into what Alaska is thinking: "And when she said she failed everyone, I knew whom she meant. IT was the everything and the everyone of her life" (Green 146). One of the last things Alaska says before she drives off into her death is: "God, how many times can I fuck up?" (Green 160). Alaska blames herself for her mother's death, as well as everything else that goes wrong in her life. She appears to believe that she is the source of all misery in her life and that people would be better off without her. Her suicide is a result of her being fragile and insecure, which is quite the contrast when compared to Edna.

4.3 Conclusion

By looking at the novel, it is clear that *Looking for Alaska* is an important novel to read side by side with a novel such as *The Awakening*. When reading a canonical feminist novel such as *The Awakening* first, it will be easier to point out the shortcomings of Green's novel. The novel is great for discussion in the classroom with the consolidation of the topic of mental health and gender roles. Alaska's character is an attempt to create a powerful minor female character that backhands. She is full of agency. She challenges stereotypes of both pretty girls and the cult of true womanhood; she is self-aware and a reflected person. She is a raging feminist and does not live a dual life. Despite her deterrent mind and independent persona, the author penalizes Alaska in so many ways. By creating a sexist male protagonist that sexualizes women without consequences and who learn a lesson at the expense of the death of the female bicharacter with no voice, the author has created a third space of skewed balance of power. The novel show that modern YAF is not to be read without being critical, in fact, the novel appear to be a step back in feminism.

5 Perspective and Conclusion

Young adults are a group of readers that are much more susceptible to literature than others. By using fictional literature as a “guide” to life, the authors, especially of YAF, are put in a position of big responsibility. When a novel from 1899, in this case *The Awakening*, is of better moral influence than one from the 21st century, it creates room for criticism, especially when it concerns sensitive topics such as suicide, patriarchy, and feminism. In this MA I have investigated how diverging literature, addressing the issue of gender roles and mental health, can facilitate learning within the ambiguous topic of health and life skills in the secondary classroom. I did this by analysing how the female characters, in the canonical novel *The Awakening* (1899) by Kate Chopin and the YAF novel *Looking for Alaska* (2005) by John Green, portray female agency and how they become penalized for it. I believe that health and life skills can be facilitated using these novels by investigating topics relevant to health and life skills, such as mental health and gender roles. When adolescents tend to identify to such a degree with novels characters, I believe that they can learn much by processing literature with healthy- and unhealthy characters. Finally, by comparing different types of literature, such as YAF and canonical literature, I believe that it can create reflection and critical thoughts around the attitudes presented in fiction.

By looking at Chopin’s novel, in chapter 3, we can see that *The Awakening* covers the topic of both gender roles and mental health very well and the novel’s many dilemmas creates room for reflection. Firstly, Edna is very aware of the prejudice of her gender and is criticised by several instances for her approach to the given gender roles. She lives in a marriage where she never had experienced neither passion nor lust. Her husband objectifies her and control her and express his expectations for women and their domesticity very clearly. The male characters of the novel, including her father and her husband, advice on the “management” of a wife, and she is constantly reminded to maintain herself to be “well”. In this very patriarchal society, Edna still manages to challenge the feminine stereotypes, and she grows more and more masculine in other characters eyes, as she grows more agentic. Edna is breaking all the stereotypical features of The Cult of Womanhood, yet the novels two polar opposite female characters, seems to symbolize the few choices she has as a woman: to be the ideal mother-woman or to be an outcast, where Edna does not want to be either. One thing that is certain is that Edna despises the pious ideal of women, and she experiments with both romantic devotion and sexual desire. Despite her love affair with Robert, he seems to only want to replace her

husband with himself and continue the domestic married life, which Edna certainly does not. Same as with marriage, Edna do not want to devote her life solely to her children either. These confining gender roles affect Edna and her mental health. First, she became an improved version of herself, with her mental awakening where she manages to erase the “dual life” and become an individual. When her change isn’t welcomed in the patriarchal society, she started penalizing herself by pushing herself down. Eventually, Edna commits suicide with the realization that she will never be as free as a man of her class. Her suicide appears to be driven by emotions, yet it can also be seen as a stereotypical masculine suicide, which amplifies her agency.

Looking at chapter 4, concerning John Greens YAF novel *Looking for Alaska*, it also portrays how gender roles intertwine with mental health, and contain many interesting aspects for reflection. In this chapter, I investigated how Alaska, one of the minor characters in *Looking for Alaska*, exemplified female agency, as well as how the author penalizes her for being agentic. Alaska is a character with a lot of agency, who challenges the stereotypical image of the pretty girl with her reflections and cleverness, yet this again participates in creating yet another stereotype of the smart pretty girl, who is still miserable. Either way, Alaska is a sexualized character, where everything she does becomes sexual, and she is restricted to her beauty. Most of this sexualization comes from the novel’s likable protagonist Pudge, which is a troubling fact, when this issue is not addressed. Pudge only sees his own idealization of Alaska, which is an object of the subjectivity of his mind, something she also sees herself. In many ways, Alaska challenges The Cult of True Womanhood stereotype. She is neither pure, pious, submissive nor in favour of the domestic ideas. Alaska is also a raging feminist, despite being so young, which is absolutely necessary considering the patriarchal toxic environment the author creates. Unfortunately, her feminism is portrayed as almost humorous when it appears exaggerated and stereotypical. Alaska does not need an awakening to become agentic, because she already is. She acts the way she wishes to and says what she wants to, despite any expectations from her male peers, who penalize her for acting that way. She commonly reflects upon the metaphor of the labyrinth, which she explains as the labyrinth of suffering. Alaska also uses this labyrinth, among other factors, to act out. She acts the reckless way she does as a scream for help, yet nobody responds to her. Alaska’s suicide becomes the “lesson” of the novel where the sexist protagonist learns a lesson and her death is almost justified and glorified. Alaska’s character is silenced, by not being able to share her thoughts, as well as her suicide

being a stereotypical feminine suicide caused by “weakness”. In many ways, Alaska is penalized as a character, and as a troubling woman, by the author.

Looking at the novels side by side, there are many similarities, and many differences. I will shed light on a few of the bigger ones, in connection with the classroom practices. Firstly, Edna and Alaska are both powerful female characters who possess a great amount of agency and they both challenge The Cult of True Woman Stereotype. From this perspective, they are healthy characters for young readers to identify with and idolize. Both characters possess what Bem would associate with masculine features such as being ambitious, self-sufficient, and independent, something that could influence the perspective on the masculine and the feminine and exaggerates the fact that women can possess all these qualities. Edna is described as a pretty woman, yet not in a typical way. Her appearance becomes more and more masculine, which is described as a positive thing in the novel and is also associated with her growing agency. Alaska’s appearance, on the other hand, is not portrayed as masculine, but rather feminine. She has the typical romanticized feminine features, and her curvy body and attractive face are pointed out repeatedly. When it comes to the view on masculine/feminine stereotypes, Edna is absolutely a healthy role model and *The Awakening* glorifies masculine women, while Alaska is rather romanticized as the feminine stereotype, which is fine, but it penalizes her as an agentic character and supports the male gaze.

Both women live in societies where they are penalized by the men around them. Edna by adult men, though in a time when this was the norm, Alaska, on the other hand, was penalized in the 21st century, by teenagers she considers her friends. For Edna, it is by the majority, but with Alaska, it is the minority, who criticizes her. The men around Edna rise above her very clearly, while the suppression of Alaska is more subtle and playful. I would argue that the latter is worse when taking the novels recent publication into consideration, but also because it is YAF. Edna has to put up with resistance from her husband, her lover, her fellow women, and society in general. She tries to be an agent in a reality where this is unacceptable. Alaska is already an agent in her own life but is trivialized by the way the author presents her and by the way the problematic behaviour against her is dismissed. *Looking for Alaska* is probably the novel with the most influential potential of the two in the secondary classroom, however, by using the novels together it can participate in visualizing the contrasts of suppression between the characters.

The topic of female sexuality and desire is also a topic in both novels, where both characters are portrayed as sexual beings. Female sexuality and desire have been and still are, controversial topics, contrary to male sexuality. In that way, both novels are important for their attitudes towards women and sex. Edna lives in a world where female desire does not exist, at least that is what is expected from a pure woman. She defies the ideology, and she dangerously explores her lust and desires. *The Awakening* gives an inside perspective on how this sexual suppression can be experienced, which many women, unfortunately, experience today as well. Alaska is also a good role model for being comfortable and outspoken about sex, despite the almost nymphomaniac reputation this gives her among the male characters. Alaska is also severely sexualized, which goes hand in hand with the reactions to her openness. Edna is penalized for having to hide her desire, while Alaska is penalized for being too open. Both novels encourage discussion around the topic of female sexuality and exemplify many positive and negative reactions to it and are therefore important in the classroom.

Both characters developed considerably through the novels, though one positively and one negatively. Edna starts off confined and imprisoned as a submissive wife and mother, and she slowly becomes independent and self-reliant. Her development does move in a curve when she all over punished herself for not being able to live her life as she wanted to. It does though end at a peak when she ends her life. Alaska's curve of development seems to start high with her being a very agentic character, yet it decreases evenly all the way down to her death. Edna has a generally positive development, while Alaska's is exclusively negative. This is further confirmed when looking into their suicides, where Edna's is masculine, and Alaska's is feminine, in the sense of Gentry's definition. I would argue that Edna's suicide is an extension and peak of her agentic journey and is therefore a protest from Chopin towards the patriarchal presumptions of the time. Alaska's suicide, I would argue, is more a sacrifice of Alaska, in favour of other (male) characters to awake. The main contradiction between the two novels is that in *The Awakening*, Edna had the opportunity to express herself and justify what she did and felt, and she was penalized by society, while Alaska had no voice and no way to justify herself, and she was also penalized, by the author's creation of her. Edna sacrificed herself; Alaska was sacrificed for others' cultivation.

Both novels are suitable in the classroom, however, they are better together. *The Awakening* can participate with quality literature that portrays the important feminist history and a healthy strong female to identify with. *Looking for Alaska* can participate with a modern and more relatable story that might be easier to read and catch interest in for young readers and

the novel is a great story about dealing with the loss of a dear friend. *The Awakening* might be more difficult to understand and appreciate for young readers, however, *Looking for Alaska* is problematic because of the unhealthy influence it can have on attitudes towards women. My idea is that by using these two novels together in the classroom, both these problems will be solved. *The Awakening* will be more understandable by processing the novel together with a modern novel with a similar theme. By analysing *Looking for Alaska* and comparing the plot with *The Awakening*, the critical sides of the novel will be addressed and enlightened. Ideally, to create the best learning outcome, *The Awakening* will be incorporated in the classroom first to acquaint the issue of the female suppression and patriarchal ideology. Then, *Looking for Alaska* will be incorporated. When the students are confronted with the question if the novel is suppressing of women, the answer will probably be no. The idea is then to analyse and enlighten this normalized suppression of women to guide the students towards awareness and to be critical.

With this MA, I hope for it to exemplify how diverging literature, with different qualities, such as canonical literature and YAF, together can facilitate learning in the secondary classroom the best. The topic of health and life skills is a complex interdisciplinary topic with many sensitive topics of interest, among them mental health and gender roles. I have investigated how gender roles can affect mental health, as portrayed in *The Awakening and Looking for Alaska*, specifically how female agency is penalized in both novels, which is problematic. My analysis suggests that the novels differ in the way the characters are penalized, which says significantly much about the authors. In *The Awakening*, Edna's agency is penalized by her fictional surroundings, based on the real world at the time. The author criticizes society throughout the novel, by making Edna the heroine. In *Looking for Alaska*, on the other hand, Alaska is penalized by her surroundings, but mainly by the author's portrayal of her. The author seems to be penalizing, and criticizing, miserable Alaska for the benefit of the development of the male characters. Considering the age gap of 100 years between the novels' publications, *Looking for Alaska* is to be considered a major step back in feminism. *The Awakening* from the late 1800s is a better feminist ideal than the best-selling *Looking for Alaska*, after all this time. I believe this says something about our present gender roles, which need to be discussed in a critical manner with pupils in order to meet the standards for health and life skills.

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