

Kate Chopin's *The Awakening* and the Tempestuous Search for Self

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Premised on the proposition that the iconic Kate Chopin's heroine, Edna Pontellier, in *The Awakening*, rejects society and her family in order to establish herself as an individual, this essay examines Edna as a soared winner in a patriarchal society. Edna does not soar to success at the end, but she is a Christ figure for the women of her society given that the women of her time were perceived as sub human beings. She does not live to enjoy the kind of freedom she tenaciously fights for, but she inspires and saves as an eye-opener to the women of her society, suggesting that freedom is worth dying for. Edna's husband and society constitute the prison that besiege her as she fights to free herself and to discern her own true identity.

A bird's eye-view of *The Awakening* pictures a groundbreaking story of a twenty-eight-year old Edna Pontellier, who shocks her society by breaking up a bizarre marriage, abandoning her biological children, willingly having an adulterous affair, and becoming an artist. During the summer in Grand Isle, an island off the coast of Louisiana, Edna meets and falls in love with a young attractive man, Robert Lebrun. They are exciting, young, and mutually respectable. Unfortunately, these qualities are absent in Edna's marriage to Leonce Pontellier, a union that is an entrapment of Edna. As she learns to think of herself as an autonomous human being with individual needs, she rebels against societal norms by leaving her husband and engaging in marital infidelity. She also becomes an artist, something not common to the women of her society. Her emotional, intellectual, spiritual, and physical awakening utterly alter her life. Her pre-occupation becomes the capture of Robert's heart. Her failure to achieve this aim compels her to commit suicide by drowning herself in the ocean.

Most critics associate *The Awakening* with the local color movement, naturalism, and modern world feminism. It is set in the period that the United States is still fragmented culturally. Like local colorists of her time, Chopin focuses on a particular region of the United States and recreates its culture and customs in minute details. She further shows the influence of the natural environment, culture on characters' view of the world, themselves, and others. Some critics consider Chopin as a Naturalist due to the influence of the ocean on Edna. Most of Chopin's works focus on Louisiana but *The Awakening* is a portrait of its French Creole culture. Born in St. Louis Missouri in 1851, Kate Chopin (Katherine O'Flaherty) writes about the society that she knows well. She was an Irish-French American and got married to a Creole cotton trader. The publication of *The Awakening* in 1899 resulted to shock and negative response from reviewers all over the country. Their concern was Kate's failure to punish Edna who goes against social norms for her personal interest. Kate Chopin was banned from the fine art club and the book was taken off shelves in St. Louis Mercantile Library. This book expresses female sexual passion, a taboo subject at that time.

Most inhabitants of Edna's Grand Isle community belong to the above culture. This culture allows married women to openly flirt with other men. Madame Ratignolle flirts with the colonel, Edna's father, during a soiree in her house. The Lebruns are other examples of those who flirt with married women. Robert, in particular, courts a different woman, especially elderly and married women every time that he visits Grand Isle. The narrator further expresses this flirtatious attitude as follows: "There were a dozen men crazy about her at the Cheniere, and since it was the fashion to be in love with married people, why, she could run away any time she liked to New Orleans with Celina's husband" (Chopin 186). This statement shows the extent to which this flirtatious attitude is common. The narrator says this in relation to Mariequita who becomes jealous as she thinks that Edna and Victor are in love. She also shows this seductive attitude towards Robert, Victor's brother. This culture plays a role in Edna's tragedy. Mrs Pontellier's southern protestant upbringing makes her an outsider to these customs. After realizing the close relationship between Edna and Robert, Madame Ratignolle says to Robert: "'Nonsense! I 'm in earnest; I mean what I say. Let Mrs Pontellier alone! She is not one of us. She is not like us. She might make the unfortunate blunder of taking you seriously'" (Chopin 35).

Edna mistakes her romantic relationship with Robert for a serious one that could lead to marriage. This relationship facilitates her struggle to assert herself. She easily falls prey because of loneliness. This may explain why Ryan Steven holds that “Edna is not destroyed because her sensuality is awakened but rather because the awareness of her sensuality emotionally resurrects her frustrated need for intimacy” (243). She sees the possibility of intimacy in Robert, the wrong person.

In addition to the influence of the Creole culture, Edna’s husband, Leonce Pontellier also pushes her to liberate herself from bondage. He focuses his attention on business and spends very little time with his wife. There is no love between them as one observes in the dialogue between Madame Ratignolle and Edna:

Madame Ratignolle: ‘It’s a pity Mr. Pontellier doesn’t stay home more in the evenings. I think you will be more-well, if you don’t mind my saying it-more united, if he did’

Edna: ‘Oh! Dear no!’ said Edna, with a blank look in her eyes. ‘What should I do if he stayed home? We wouldn’t have anything to say to each other.’ (Chopin 115)

This dialogue portrays a marriage relationship that has lost its romance. Mr. Pontellier prefers spending his time in Klein’s hotel instead of accompanying his wife to the “soiree musicale,” an evening of entertainment at the Ratignolles. Ironically, his presence will not even mean anything to Edna. Their marriage, from all indications, seems to have been a mistake. One sees Edna’s frustration when her husband comes back late in the night, accuses her of negligence, talks monotonously and insistently. She rocks in wicker chair and cries for long while he sleeps. The wicker chair symbolizes loneliness and frustration. The sound of the sea and the cry of an owl intensify her sorrow, creating an atmosphere of a dirge.

In another occasion, he blames her for misdirecting the cook. Her husband shows no respect for her. He considers her as one of his material possessions and spends his time gathering expensive possessions for his family. In this society, wealth is more important than human relationships. This may explain why other women whose husbands are less generous than Mr. Pontellier envy Edna in spite of her entrapment and sorrow.

The beginning of chapter xvii, “The Pontelliers possessed a very charming home on Esplanade Street in New Orleans” (Chopin 83), further symbolizes the importance and influence of wealth on the characters in this community. In the evening that Edna refuses to receive callers as she has been doing for the past years, Mr. Pontellier declares that she needs to apologize to Mrs. Belthrop because Mrs. Belthrop “could buy them ten times over” (84). According to him, money is more important than someone’s character. Belthrop’s respect springs from wealth so she deserves an apology. On the other, Mrs. Highcamp, Madame La Force, and Eleonor Beltons, who cover long distances to come to his house do not deserve any apology from the Pontelliers because they are not rich. This justifies Mr. Pontellier’s attachment to material possessions, and his negligence of Edna that makes her a prisoner bound to revolt in order to have freedom. Edna does not want to remain in this slumber as the other Creole women. Pizer Donald, therefore, makes a psychological division of the *The Awakening* into two main parts. It is made of “an initial section in Grand Isle, in which Edna awakens from her earlier death-in-life as a middle class Creole wife and mother, and a following section in New Orleans, where she attempts to translate her rebirth into actualities of her life” (5).

Furthermore, the women of this society are contrary to Edna’s view of who a woman should be. Edna constantly thinks of her childhood when she always dreamt of a romantic woman, a “devoted wife of a man who worshiped her, she felt she would take her place with a certain dignity in the world of reality, closing the petals behind her upon the realm of romance and dreams” (33). These are the qualities that she will never find in her dehumanizing marriage. In her community, the importance of women lays in childbearing. Madame Ratignolle is the ideal woman of this society. She is the embodiment of every womanly grace and charm amongst the “mother-women”. These are women who adore their children and worshiped their husbands. Edna does not want to follow the feet steps of these women. Madame Ratignolle feels comfortable to sacrifice her life for her children but Edna disagrees with her. Edna’s sense of freedom and her reluctance to play the mother role as the French Creole culture demands portrays her struggle to assert herself and makes her husband to see her as a piece of “property which has suffered some damage” (7).

The irony about the “mother-woman role is that, the model, Mrs. Raginolle is most ugly during childbirth. Edna assists her during this difficult period and that influences her again. This reminds one of Simon Karen’s views that *The Awakening* deals with the principles of life and its influence on Edna (243). Childbirth is a painful natural thing and this society feels obliged to maintain it as the sole basis on who a good woman should be. The cage bird symbolizes the imprisonment, the state in which these circumstances place Edna. She sees her marriage as a mistake and the climax of fate. She sees a wedding as “the most lamentable spectacles on earth” (110). She shows her dissatisfaction by refusing to participate in her sister’s wedding. She thinks that the whole world is against her. Life becomes meaningless to her. To her, life is “a grotesque pandemonium and humanity like worms struggling toward inevitable annihilation” (97). Worms here stand for decay. The parrot constantly reminds her in this expression: “Allez vous-en! Allez vous-en! Sapristi!” (5). This expression is the French version of “Get out! Get out! Damn it!”

Given these societal constraints and the dehumanizing marriage, Edna vows to revote and establish herself as an autonomous person:

‘One of these days, I’m going to pull myself together for a while and think-try to determine what character of a woman I am, for, candidly, I don’t know. By all the codes which I am acquainted with, I am a devilishly wicked specimen of the sex. But some way I can’t convince myself that I am. I must think about it.’ (137)

Edna’s desire no to bother about societal conventions and to focus on her progress towards freedom are shown in this declaration. Edna has two choices. She can either continue to follow societal codes and remain a psychological prisoner; or she can become an autonomous individual with the status of an imperfect woman in her society. Through a study of Michael Toolans’ theory, the analysis of conversation in dialogue and authoritative language in dialogue shows that this is Edna’s first instance to take a firm stance and failure to do so will lead to her downfall (Marion Muirhead 42).

Nature also plays a role in Edna’s awakening and the subsequent struggle to assert herself. This begins when Robert invites her to swim in the ocean. As she dives into the water, she begins to swim to her surprise and to the surprise of those that had struggled to teach her how to swim for long. The narrator compares this sudden swimming to “a little tottering, stumbling, clutching child” (47) who suddenly realizes the power in her and walks for the rest of her life alone, boldly, and with confidence. In this context, the little child symbolizes Edna’s past struggle with her family and society. When the ocean equips her with strength, she feels empowered and swims further, covering a distance that no woman has covered before. This symbolizes the change that she will bring to her life. It stands for freedom that she lacks. The narrator says:

The voice of the sea is seductive, never ceasing, whispering, clamoring, inviting the soul to wonder for a spell in abysses of solitude; to lose itself in mazes of inward contemplation. The voice of the sea speaks to the soul. The touch of the sea is sensuous, enfolding the body in its soft, close embrace. (25)

Edna seems to acquire some mystical powers from the sea. In this passage, there is the use of voices that appear in the most realistic style that is typical of Chopin’s era (Treu Robert 21). Robert Lebrun’s story about the action of spirits in the month of August, further emphasizes this idea. According to Robert, at midnight on the twenty-eight of August spirits come out of the sea and empower some mortals who are worthy to hold them and keep them company. Edna begins to realize her position in the universe as a human being and her relationship with the world. During this occasion, reflections on her childhood remind her of the time she walked on the green fields with the desire to continue going. This stands for her desire to liberate herself and to live as an independent woman.

Given the above natural empowerment at the backdrop of past solitude and regret, Edna starts rebelling openly. She leaves her companions at the shore and returns all by herself. They are surprise because she could not do this before. They call her but she cares less and just continues to move away. When her husband returns late in the night from Klein hotel, she rejects her demands to meet him in their bedroom. This seems to be the end of an emotional relationship between them. When she falls in love with Robert, she thinks of a possibility of their getting married in future. She starts neglecting her domestic duties and this increases the gap between her and her husband. She also becomes insolent. She calls for Robert to keep her company when Leonce is away.

In addition, Edna sends the servant to summon Leonce who is sleeping to a meeting in which she informs him that she is going to Cheniere with Robert. She only informs him and does what pleases her. The journey to Cheniere provides enough time for her to flirt and get close to Robert, the man who will serve as a motivation for the struggle to assert herself. While in the Island, Madame Antoine's clean bed and peaceful environment that contrasts that of Edna's house make her sleep for long. The natural setting provides a romantic atmosphere. Robert sings a song, "Si tu savais!", a French expression for "If you knew." This portrays Edna's regret about her past life. She later uses this song as a constant reminder of Robert's presence in her life when he is away. She thinks about him as she advances in her journey to freedom. She sings it while waiting for her husband.

This song in particular and music in general, seem to contribute to Edna's struggle for independence. Music evokes patterns of images in her mind and she weeps passionately. Music seems to awaken the spirit of freedom in her. Robert and passion are synonymous to her. In her erotic relationship with Alcee Arobin, she pictures Robert in him. She thinks that she is doing something wrong to Robert and not to her husband. Robert is the symbol of her freedom. He represents everything that she chooses without the influence of society.

Another step towards self-assertion is that Edna rebels from depending on her husband's money. She rejects the traditional role of receiving callers and devotes most of her time to arts. She gets her own money from her sketches and gambling. The following statements of the narrator reveal the climax of Edna's battle for independence:

She turned back into the room and began to walk to and fro down its whole length, without stopping, without resting. She carried in her hand a thin handkerchief, which she tore into ribbons, rolled into a ball, and flung from her. Once she stopped, and taking off her wedding ring, flung it upon the carpet. When she saw it lying there, she stamped her heel upon it, striving to crush it [...] In a sweeping passion, she seized a glass vase from the table and flung it upon the tiles of the hearth [...] The clash and clatter were what she wanted to hear. (87)

Edna breaks a glass vase and tramples on her wedding ring, and symbolizes her breaking of the chain of bondage and the crushing of a failed marriage respectively. The wedding ring is a symbol of the union between husband and wife. Thus, its destruction symbolizes the end of that relationship. She does not want any reconciliation suggested in the words "clash" and "clatter" that she loves to hear. These acts follow the voices that come to her as she stands by the window and looks into darkness. The voices sound messages that are mournful and devoid of hope like the voices of dead people that she hears while in the boat with Robert. This is a premonition but she wants her freedom at all costs. This reminds one of the warning that Mademoiselle Reisz gives her as she: "The bird that would soar above the level plain of tradition and prejudice must have strong wings. It is sad spectacle to see the weaklings bruised, exhausted, fluttering back to earth" (138). She means that anybody who goes into the fight for freedom should be very courageous and be ready to face all consequences. Edna is aware of these but prefers to sacrifice anything for her self-assertion. Her attempt to destroy the wedding ring follows one of her quarrels in which her husband tells her how worthless she is.

From this incident, she decides to leave to her own house when her husband is away. She does and even organizes a party to celebrate her total freedom. The new house provides a comfortable environment for her artistic works. She reads the works of Emerson in the night without any disturbance. This demonstrates Virginia Woolf's idea that, a woman needs to have her own house in order to be a successful artist.

In spite of Edna's success, she remains a victim of wrong judgement. She thinks the love between her and Robert is not reciprocal. Her passionate feelings towards Robert make her fail to be realistic. He goes to Mexico without her awareness and does not even write to her while there. When she takes one of his letters from Mademoiselle Reisz, she weeps passionately and does not finally read it. When he returns without informing her and coincidentally meets her after two days she still sticks to this obsession. The narrator says that his glance penetrated to the "sleeping places of her soul" (163). After leaving her husband and becoming an artist, she, ironically, lives for one thing, to acquire Robert's love. Her husband promises to take her for a trip abroad and in order to save appearance as this society requires, gives the impression that they are in good terms. A newspaper article claims that their house is under repairs. This is his plan to conceal Edna's departure. Her children and Arobin write letters to her showing their devotion to her but she rejects all these and embraces death.

When Edna realizes that Robert has rejected her, she finds life meaningless. She wants nothing but her own way. She wants no human being besides her except him. As she walks toward the beach, new feelings come through her mind and the narrator describes as follows:

Robert, and she even realized that the day would come, when he, too, and the thought of him would melt out of her existence, leaving her alone. The thought of children appeared before her like antagonists who had overcome her, who had overpowered and sought to drag her into the soul's slavery for the rest of her days. (189)

From the above, one concludes that Edna can not find a place in the real world. She finally rejects her innocent children and eludes the real world by drowning herself. Her idea of an autonomous person is extreme. To Mahon Robert Lee, Mademoiselle Reisz is supposed to be the heroine because she is a successful artist who does not expect appreciation or applause. She holds that Edna is a coward (228). This may be true to an extent but one wonders what Mademoiselle Reisz will do if placed in Edna's situation. That is, being a Creole wife, mother, and an artist at this era.

In the same light, Jones Paul Christian holds that *The Awakening* appears to be "specifically evoked, mirrored, and revised through out [Anne Tyler's] *Ladder of Years*, the story of a housewife and mother who decides during a beachside vacation to walk away from her family and establish a separate life elsewhere" (271). It is true that Delia goes further than Edna but one needs to take their time setting into consideration. *Ladder of Years* is published in 1995 while *The Awakening* has its setting in the Creole Culture of 1889.

The Awakening is a prototype of the novel of awakening (Rosowski Susan 27). It deals with Edna's struggle against society and family in order to establish herself as an independent person, even if it means ending as a bruised winner or in death. Kate Chopin, a psychological symbolist, shows the extent a woman can go to attain freedom. Her symbols, in fact, connect to tell the complete and complex story (Dyer Joyce). Chopin uses images such as the sea, moon, gulf spirit, Kentucky meadow, oaks and violets to show Edna's awaking. On the other hand, she uses the cage bird and the pigeon house to portray Edna's imprisonment.

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