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Review Paper

Beyond the Shoreline: Edna Pontellier's Quest for Selfhood in a Patriarchal World

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ABSTRACT

Kate Chopin's *The Awakening* (first published in 1899) presents a heartfelt exploration of a woman's emotional and intellectual struggle against the restrictive gender norms of her time. Through the protagonist, Edna Pontellier, Chopin gives voice to a woman awakening to her individuality and questioning the roles imposed upon her. This paper re-examines the novel using contemporary feminist theories and psychoanalytic insights, highlighting the tension between societal expectations and personal freedom. In doing so, it humanizes Edna's experience, portraying her not just as a symbol of resistance but as a deeply conflicted individual grappling with her identity.

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1. INTRODUCTION

Published at the cusp of the 20th century, *The Awakening* initially shocked readers with its portrayal of a woman's emotional and physical independence. Today, it stands as a cornerstone of feminist literature. Chopin's depiction of Edna's inner journey towards self-awareness—and the consequences she faces—continues to resonate in modern discourse about gender and identity. The novel is not merely a social critique but a psychological inquiry into the evolving consciousness of a woman seeking meaning beyond prescribed gender roles.

The Awakening depicts the journey of Edna Pontellier, wife and mother, from her acceptance of normative gender roles to dissatisfaction and later on, to her realisation that the society in which she dwells will never tolerate non-conformity.

Edna Pontellier's story begins in the sultry atmosphere of Grand Isle, located in the Gulf of Mexico, where vacationing with her family offers a momentary respite from the rigid expectations of her domestic life. It is in this setting that Edna first feels a sense of freedom. Her experiences—learning to swim, falling in love with Robert Lebrun, rekindling her passion for art—serve as catalysts for her awakening. These moments signify more than rebellion; they represent an emotional and intellectual transformation that challenges the structural limitations of 19th-century American society.

Contrasting Edna's evolution are the characters of Adele Ratignolle and Mademoiselle Reisz. Adele embodies the idealized version of womanhood—nurturing, beautiful, and wholly devoted to family. She symbolizes societal expectations, always graceful, gentle, and submissive. In stark contrast, Mademoiselle Reisz lives as a solitary artist, independent but ostracized. Her artistic independence comes at the cost of social

acceptance, but she retains her integrity and autonomy. These two women form the binary poles of femininity in the novel, providing Edna with models to both emulate and resist.

The Awakening condemns the phallocentric hegemony that requires women to submit to, depend upon, and remain faithful to their husbands, to place their children above themselves, and maintain social relations. The feminist theories of Luce Irigaray, a French feminist, psychoanalyst, and philosopher, help contextualize this dynamic. In psychoanalysis, she is particularly concerned with phallocentric discourse, which understands women through erasure. Irigaray critiques the phallocentric structure of society, which often defines women about men and dismisses their desires as secondary (Irigaray, 1991, pp. 71–78). Adele represents the "perfect woman" through a patriarchal lens—decorative, dutiful, and self-sacrificing. Her beauty and devotion are celebrated, but only insofar as they serve her husband and children. She is idealized but objectified. She censures the binary system that regards man as privileged and woman as lacking something. She argues that patriarchal structures interpret motherhood as naturally feminine, and hence, any woman's desire that falls outside the confines of motherhood is seen as unnatural or heinous

In *The Awakening,* Adele Ratignolle is the perfect embodiment of the phallocentric ideals set for women because she exists within her proper womanly place. She is nothing more than a beautiful mother and wife:

Her beauty was all there, flaming and apparent: the spun gold hair that no comb nor confining pin could restrain; the blue eyes that were like nothing but sapphires; two lips that pouted, that were so red one could only think of cherries or some other delicious crimson fruit in looking at them. (Chopin, 1993, 8)

Her characterisation creates the contrast by which Edna's beauty is measured. Adele's desirability is limited to her body. She is idealised as the phallocentric society's exemplary model for women. Her beauty is equated with gold, jewels and fruits-things that can be purchased. Furthermore, her adherence to societal codes of conduct and her submission to her husband's physical desires prove her devotion in perfectly performing her gender.

Mademoiselle Reisz's identity as a socially viable being is clearly called into question throughout the novel. She is not admired for her appearance but respected for her talent. However, this respect comes with social alienation. Her character challenges the notion that a woman's worth lies in her capacity to nurture or please. Reisz is the embodiment of uncompromising individuality. She remains a single, eccentric musician who never considers marriage or conformity. She is described as "a disagreeable little woman, no longer young, who had quarrelled with almost everyone" (25).

Edna, meanwhile, is caught in the tension between these two archetypes. She is neither as selfless as Adele nor as radical as Reisz. She is introspective, artistic, emotionally intense, and intellectually curious. Her emotional responses are raw and spontaneous, indicative of an emerging self-awareness that disrupts the artificial calm of domestic life. Her relationships with her husband Léonce and her lover Robert Lebrun illuminate her growing disillusionment with romantic and familial obligations.

Edna is described as "rather handsome than beautiful, as an incoherent being at times and a viable being at other times:

(Edna's) Mrs. Pontellier's eyes were quick and bright; they were a yellowish brown, about the color of her hair. She had a way of turning them swiftly upon an object and holding them there as if lost in some inward maze of contemplation or thought. . .. Her face was captivating because of a certain frankness of expression and a contradictory subtle play of features. Her manner was engaging. (3)

This description seems to subvert the patriarchal notions of the desirability of feminine beauty as reflected in Adele. However, Edna's mental capacity is alluded to in her description, giving her more mental abilities than Adele. The description of Edna also stands in contrast to the description of Reisz. Reisz is described in negative terms, whereas the description of Edna is discursively more intriguing and emphasises her physical appearance and mental capacity in much more positive terms. Edna is initially assumed as a mother, a woman but soon afterwards this expectation is frustrated: "In short, Mrs. Pontellier was not a mother-woman" (8). Her lack of attention towards her children is evidenced by the fact that after returning home from the club, one night, Leonce (Mr. Pontellier) went to see his sleeping sons and thought that one of them was down with fever. So "he reproached his wife with her inattention, her habitual neglect of the children. If it was not a mother's place to look after the children, who's on earth, was it?" (5).

The clash between Edna and Leonce illustrates Chopin's anticipation of Freudian psychology. Perhaps he cannot understand why Edna is so careless regarding her children. According to Freudian psychology, she should feel some sort of fulfilment through them. But here the case is different. In response to Leonce's complaint, she goes to her son and discovers that in fact, he did not have a fever, she returns to her bed without another word to her husband that night. She does not alter her role as a mother anywhere in the novel to conform to the phallocentric definition of motherhood. An ideal of perfect motherhood, Adele again stands in stark contrast to Edna. While Adele always seems to have one of her children clinging to her skirts, Edna's children are off at a distance with the domestic caretaker.

Previously, Adele is projected as an object to be gazed upon by the male society, so also Edna is depicted as an article to be possessed by her husband. After Edna bathes in the gulf and returns to their cottage, Leonce reprimands her: "what folly! To bathe at such an hour in such heat! . . . You are burnt beyond recognition he added, looking at his wife as one looks at a valuable piece of property which has suffered some damage" (2). Leonce accuses Edna of idiocy and regards her as property. On the other hand, Edna assumes some masculine attributes, which trouble the men around her. She wishes to act and behave like a man. Her strategy for obtaining independence is to appropriate masculine values for herself. She stops taking callers on her established Tuesdays because she "Simply felt like going out", much like her husband does when he goes to the club: "She

throws her wedding ring on the floor and stomps on it" (51-52). She spends her days painting in her studio. Regarding Edna's painting habit, he states:

It seems to me the utmost folly for a woman at the head of the household, and the mother of children, to spend in an atelier a day which would be better employed contriving for the comfort of her family. (57)

Leonce's reaction to Edna's change leads him to consult Dr. Mandelot, the family physician, which is perhaps the most blatant Freudian moment of the text. He says to the Dr. that: "She's got some sort of notion in her head concerning the eternal rights of women" (65). Dr. Mandelot responds by saying that, "most women are moody and whimsical. This is some passing whim of your wife, due to some cause or causes which you and I needn't try to fathom. But it will happily pass over . . ." (66). Edna's new found phallic power has the potential to symbolically castrate men's exclusive power rights. The perpetual fear of castration and need to preserve male power leads the doctor to reduce Edna's awakening to an idiocy, rendering her culturally unintelligible. Patriarchal power is also ensured by Edna's father. When Edna refuses to attend her sister's marriage, her father gets angry. Leonce apologises for Edna's action but her father advises by saying, "You are too lenient, too lenient by far, Leonce. Authority, coercion are what is needed. Put your foot down good and hard; the only way to manage a wife. Take my word for it" (79).

When Edna's mind and body stray from her children and her husband, Adele reminds Edna of her place and duty to her family. Then Edna tells Adele, "I would give up the unessential; I would give my money, I would give my life for my children; but I wouldn't give myself" (47). Although Adele cannot fathom the meaning of her words, this dialogue between the two (Edna and Adele) demonstrates the breakdown of the performative action of communication. It also provides a platform for Edna's articulation of her identity. Edna's and Adele's goals are different. Edna is aimed at moving beyond the societal constraints placed upon her, whereas Adele cannot imagine a self-outside of this system.

Though Edna invents her desired identity and independence however because she assumes phallic attributes and she is biologically female, she is never accepted as a viable being within a patriarchal system. At the end of the novel she commits suicide, thus she prefers to silence herself rather than being forced back into the system through her husband and her children's possession of her.

Chopin's *The Awakening* has been the subject of extensive scholarly debate, particularly within feminist and psychoanalytic frameworks. Elaine Showalter identifies Edna Pontellier's awakening as an early expression of feminist consciousness, interpreting the novel as a foundational exploration of female autonomy and resistance to domestic constraints (Showalter, 1992, 33-45). In *The Madwoman in the Attic*, Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar situate Chopin's work within the tradition of 19th-century women writers who subvert patriarchal structures through narrative innovation and the portrayal of rebellious female protagonists (Gilbert & Gubar, 1979, 73). More recent critics, including Showalter, continue to emphasize the novel's enduring relevance in contemporary feminist discourse, viewing Edna's defiance as an early and powerful challenge to hegemonic masculinity and the rigid gender roles of her time (Showalter, 1992, 33-45).

Additionally, critics like Donald Pizer explore the socio-historical context of Creole culture, illuminating how gender expectations in 19th-century Louisiana exacerbated the protagonist's identity crisis (Pizer, 1969, 53-55). This rich critical landscape demonstrates that *The Awakening* functions as both a product of its time and a prescient critique of gender binaries.

Mikaela McConnell's article, "A Lost Sense of Self by Ignoring Others in The Awakening by Kate Chopin," explores how Edna Pontellier's journey of self-discovery in Kate Chopin's novel involves a complex relationship with others. The article argues that Edna's quest for self-awareness and independence is intertwined with her interactions and perceptions of the people around her, both positively and negatively (McConnell, 2014, 41-44).

This study draws primarily on feminist literary theory, particularly the work of Simone de Beauvoir, Judith Butler, and Helene Cixous. De Beauvoir's assertion in *The Second Sex* that "one is not born, but rather becomes, a woman" (Beauvoir, 1989, 330) is especially relevant to Edna's transformation throughout the novel. Judith Butler's concept of gender performativity, as articulated in *Gender Trouble*, provides a lens to understand Edna's rejection of traditional female roles as an act of subversive performance (Butler, 1990, 33).

Cixous's theory of *écriture féminine* underscores the importance of women writing their narratives, a notion paralleled in Chopin's narrative control and character development (Cixous, 1976, 877). The interplay of these theoretical perspectives facilitates a nuanced understanding of the gendered tensions that permeate the novel.

Psychoanalytic perspectives, particularly Freudian interpretations, suggest that Edna's quest for independence conflicts with deeply embedded maternal instincts and societal conditioning. Her sexual awakening is not merely physical—it is existential. Her refusal to maintain conjugal relations, to host social functions, and to obey her husband all reflect her desire to reclaim agency.

Her artistic pursuits become another form of liberation. Painting offers a realm of self-expression untouched by societal judgment. She rents her own space—the "pigeon house"—where she explores life on her own terms. This symbolic move signifies her separation from the patriarchal household and from her husband's economic control. Yet, this freedom is transient and precarious.

Robert's eventual departure, and his inability to fully accept Edna's independence, reinforces the impossibility of true equality within heteronormative relationships at the time. His traditional views clash with Edna's growing awareness. In the absence of genuine partnership and societal support, Edna turns to the sea.

The sea is a recurring motif symbolizing freedom, solitude, and rebirth. For Edna, it is both sanctuary and escape. Her final swim into its depths can be read as an act of self-assertion rather than despair. In a world unwilling to accommodate her complexity, Edna chooses a form of liberation that is tragic but resolute.

Edna Pontellier's journey in *The Awakening* is a compelling portrayal of a woman navigating between societal norms and personal freedom. Through her interactions with other characters, her resistance to gender roles, and her ultimate act of autonomy, Edna becomes both a feminist symbol and a deeply human figure. Chopin critiques a society that limits women's potential and punishes deviation, while also illustrating the emotional cost of awakening in a world that offers no refuge for the awakened. The novel's enduring power lies in its unflinching portrayal of the struggle for selfhood in the face of rigid social conformity. It calls readers to question whether true freedom can ever exist in a world built on gendered expectations. By giving emotional depth to Edna's struggle, Chopin transforms a feminist statement into a timeless human story.

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