

On Edna's Self- Quest, Perplexity and Suicide in The Awakening

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Abstract: Kate Chopin, a forerunner of feminist writers in America, published her masterpiece, *The Awakening* in 1899. The novel describes the journey of Edna's awakening. After her awakening, she is so hopeless and lonely that she can't find her own way. Finally, she has to walk into the sea. Her short life is the process of her awakening and the period of self-consciousness. As Chopin touches the sensitive subject and challenges the traditional morality, the novel is listed as a banned book. Until the 1950's, it has been rediscovered, being a classic works in American literature. The prime point in *The Awakening* is to get rebirth in awakening and to die in perplexity. However, Edna's death is ever-lasting existence in a deeper level. This thesis aims to survey Edna's awakening, perplexity, rebirth and death as well as to explore the essential reasons of her death.

1. Introduction

Kate Chopin's masterpiece, *The Awakening*, was published in 1899. This work immediately suffered extensive controversy as this novel was concerned with sensitive subjects such as extramarital affairs, deserting home, leaving children and so on, challenging the traditional morality and values in the patriarchic society. In the following decades, she and her works were forgotten until Peter Seyersted, a European scholar published *The Complete Works of Kate Chopin* in 1969. Consequently, the deeper interest in Kate Chopin's work in general was stimulated. Similar to Walt Whitman's *Leaves of Grass*, *The Awakening* was greatly criticized by the public. It is a precocious piece, which bravely describes extramarital love of a young lady, highly praises female personality awakening. As a "New Feminist", Chopin's masterpiece-*The Awakening*, can be regarded as a dauntless attempt and an exploration in Chopin's writing career [1]. The heroine in this novel, Edna, growing in Kentucky, married Mr. Pontellier, a wealthy businessman in New Orleans and gave birth to two children. She was described as a healthy female with passion like male.[2] The story starts from her summer holiday in the Grand Island near New Orleans with her children. The persons she met there are all men of wealth from New Orleans, which are the Creoles embracing Catholicism and whose values and customs are different from the puritan traditions in Edna's hometown, Kentucky. The marriage of Edna and Mr. Pontellier is not based on love. In other words, Edna respects her husband instead of loving him and Mr. Pontellier regards her as his private property. After the summer vocation, she takes steps toward relieving herself from the obligations of mother and wife. Therefore, she desires to be satisfied mentally and sensually, unwilling to be confined by family and marriage without love. She fell in love with Robert, who is also attracted by her. However, in order to protect their reputation, he goes to Mexico. During the days of Robert's departure, her nature of awakening turns into sex. Arobin, a dandy, satisfies her sexual need. Accidentally, she meets Robert and expresses her thought that she is no longer Mr. Pontellier's private possessions. She can make the decision by herself. However, Robert is gone again, having left a goodbye note. She begins "to look with her own eyes; to see and apprehend the deeper under currents of life" [3]. Therefore, she desires to be satisfied mentally and sensually, unwilling to be confined by family and marriage without love.

2. Kate Chopin and Feminism

Kate Chopin, born in Katherine O'Flaherty (February 8, 1851 – August 22, 1904), is a renowned American author of short stories and novels and regarded as a pioneering realistic writer of the 20th

century. She was in a family with an Irish Catholic father and a French Creole mother, in St. Louis, Missouri. As her father was killed in an accident in 1855, she was raised by her mother, grandmother and great-grandmother, who were all widows. Influenced by her great-grandmother and the education in St. Louis, she had a good command of French, music and literature, especially Maupassant novels, which exerted a great influence on her creation. In 1870 she married Oscar Chopin. During her marriage, she enjoyed a wide range of unconventional freedom. Her husband admired her independence and constantly supported her. However, something unexpected happened. In 1883 Kate became a widow with six children. Afterwards, she lost her mother in 1895. The characters in her stories are usually inhabitants of Louisiana. Many of her works are set in Natchitoches in north central Louisiana. The themes involved in her fictions were love, marriage and extramarital affairs.

The Awakening described the process of Edna's awakening, so it was related to feminism which had great effect on Kate Chopin's writing. With the rising of the freedom movements, the woman chose to be economically, politically, and emotionally independent. They desired to escape from traditional morals and values. A large number of female writers began to question women's traditional roles. As Larzer Ziff ever expressed in the American 1890s his opinion that to become female author was to be a writer about women and their demands [4]. Kate Chopin was influenced by feminism movement. And *The Awakening* is a typical example to reject the tradition and conventions of literature. Her independence and individuality were well reflected in *The Awakening* by Mademoiselle Reisz, who told Edna that the artist must have the courageous soul and must possess strong wings to challenge the tradition and prejudice. However, the Victorian codes were still prevalent in people's mind. Although Chopin was aware of women's problems, she was unable to solve them. Therefore, the contradictions between women's self-consciousness and social anticipation became the subject of her novels.

3. Edna's Rebirth in *The Awakening*

3.1 Edna's Awakening

In the traditional literature, respected women are gentle and virtuous goddesses who dote upon their children and deeply adore their husbands. In their world, they see the family as everything even at the sacrifice of themselves and sex. Generally speaking, decent women have no sexual desire or no ability to enjoy it. Sex is a vague topic, which should not be a subject in literature, and passion is regarded as disgraceful, and the "self-respecting female assumed she does not possess passion" [5]. However, Chopin bravely chose the theme of sexuality to illustrate female independence. In her mind, women not only possess passion but also enjoy it outside both marriage and love.

Edna is different from the conservative ones- women who dote on their children and admire their husbands, and "esteemed it a holy privilege to efface themselves as individuals and grow wings as ministering angles" [3]. However, facing these conservative women, Edna started to change her attitude toward the unknown area of the feminine. At the same time, Edna's passion was inspired by her "sensuous susceptibility to beauty" [4].

At that time, it is impossible for women to make a living without money from their husbands. The economic basis is the foundation of independence. Therefore, Edna shows her spiritual awakening by making money on her own and moving into her "pigeon house", where she puts off the social obligation of a wife and mother. Although Edna doesn't go very far on the way to her spiritual awakening, she is trying to be a "New Woman", which chooses to be financially, spiritually and physically independent. Edna deeply believes that Robert awakens her from "a life-long, stupid dream" [4]. To her disappointment, Robert is just an ordinary man to obey traditional codes and another Mr. Pontellier in nature, wanting her to be a virtuous wife. He will never get the idea of her rebellion and pursuit of freedom. She realizes that no one can understand her and she is a solitary soul in the society.

When Edna walks towards the deep sea, she was astonished by the strange and awful world, and

thought herself as one new creature in the unknown environment. Before her she only saw the boundless green sea, and she thought that she must go on walking into the sea. She only feels the stretch before her, as if she must walk on forever without the end of it. She did not remember whether she was frightened or pleased. But she must be entertained. She does not think she is walking into death but an a new birth. Finally, Edna realizes that the past years seemed like dreams in which one remains in asleep and wish to not wake up. So she can achieve complete liberty and individuality in the deep sea. Therefore her final choice is her ultimate awakening.

3.2 The Factors of her Awakening

In Chopin's description, "mother woman" is self-sacrificing. They regard their children and husbands as everything, represented by Adele Ratignolle. However, the conflict between self-sacrifice and self-realization tortures Edna. She is unwilling to serve others. She has "sensuous susceptibility to beauty" [3]. When asked what she was thinking about, she was in fact aware of thinking nothing and she also believed that she can reverse her thoughts.

Adele is a great "mother-woman" "with beloved appearance-bold hair, blue eyes and rosy lips. As a traditional wife and mother, she is selfless and diligently nurturing. Adele is the model of the 19th century, based on her dedication to the family. In addition, Adele promotes her nature and makes her realize female physiological needs. However, Edna cannot be another Adele due to her incapability to be another Adele. Furthermore, it is Adele that arouses her self-consciousness. There is something more intense than friendship between Edna and Reisz. In fact, Reisz is not easygoing, but Edna still wins her favor. If Adele is a "faultless Madonna" on behalf of traditional values and morality, Reisz is a rebel, impatient to social codes. To the kind of person like Arobin, she is not attractive, womanly and pleasant. As a matter of fact, although she is not popular, Reisz seems to touch Edna's deep heart and emotion.

Edna's husband, Mr. Pontellier, is busy with business all day. He spends his large amount of time on business, bar, gambling and even red-light districts even if he states he loves his wife and children very much. However, Mr. Pontellier's failure in understanding Edna makes her unwilling to face to him. Their marriage goes on without passion. If the sea awakes her physical awareness, Robert stirs her sexual awakening. When Edna waits for Mr. Pontellier, she enjoys the moment of silence, with the heart filled with the first-felt desire. And her emotion to Robert becomes more and more tense. After Robert departs to Mexico, she feels her days are boring and dulled. However, the first kiss and the passion out of her nature is given to another man-Arobin who is like a flame that burned her desire. To her, Arobin is nothing. And she holds that sex and love can separate from each other. Edna refused to have sexual relation with her husband, meanwhile, she is passionate to Robert. But she chooses to have an extramarital affair with Arobin. In this way, she shows initiative towards men and challenges the old tradition of passive femininity.

4. Conflicts in the Social Roles

4.1 Conflict between Motherhood and Selfhood

In the Victorian Time, mother-women are women who devote themselves to the family where they nurture their children, admire their husbands, and regards it as a proud to obliterate themselves as individuals. Mr. Pontellier expected Edna a mother-woman to nurture children and worship her husband. Instead, she was fond of her children in an uneven, impulsive way. She sees the children as hinders who cannot be overcome to confine her in a cage where she has to be a slaver in the rest of her days. However, physiological characteristics of women determine that women can only be mothers. Though, she is unwilling to be a mother psychologically, she already has had children. Although she is not a perfect mother as Adele, she still cannot escape the ability to take care of children. She suffers the conflict between motherhood and selfhood. Experts at home and abroad usually think that Edna's self-awareness makes her impossible to take the responsibility of wife and mother, yet she also find that the duty of wife and mother is the obstacle of her self-realization and independence. She can never solve the conflicts. "Unwilling 'to trample tip on the little lives', either

of her children or of herself, Edna chooses to sacrifice the 'unessential'-her mortal existence" [6].

4.2 Conflict between Wifhood and Selfhood

In the 19th century, a "true woman" should maintain the home and family, committing to husband and children and having fidelity. Women are men's possessions. They should be subordinate to their husbands, to caring children and manage households. Many women are confined at home to be a mother-woman or true woman, sacrificing their interest, talents, independence and self-realization. In *The Awakening*, Mr. Pontellier expects Edna to be his tool and property. He never cares for what Edna thinks, instead he only cares about what his family looks to the outside world. He treats Edna as one of his employees. Edna realizes he has no real identity and feels lonely. In Edna's inner world, she rejects the role of a wife, unwilling to be a gentle wife that Mr. Pontellier can control. The conflict Edna suffers between wifhood and selfhood mainly results from her marriage with Mr. Pontellier. In her view, marriages are merely "masquerades" and her marriage to her husband is just an accident with love and passion.

5. Edna's Death in the Wake of Perplexity

5.1 Edna's Perplexity after Awakening

Since the existence of human beings, as a delicate problem, sex influences or puzzles them. After mankind has stepped into civilized society, sex is labeled the sensitive subject. In patriarchal society, women are deprived of sex. In other words, they should have no passion or enthusiasm toward sex and remain always passive in sexual process. Chopin boldly smashes the traditional lies that women are asexual and that sex can occur out of marriage and true love. Obviously, it is forbidden and immoral.

Edna also encounters the contradiction of her self-realization and obligation. She strives for personal freedom and independence, which is against her responsibility as a wife and mother. Under the control of moral codes, to maintain the family and to breed children are women's duty. But being a wife and mother is a cage, preventing her from the pursuit of freedom. However, the unique characteristics of women doom their fate and determine their social responsibility. The women's privilege, namely giving birth to children, is increasing a fetter of self-realization in some sense [7]. The Doctor once told Edna that it is a provision of Nature and a decoy to be mothers for women and that women are obliged to maintain the order. Chopin is sympathetic towards Edna and understands her situation. But she can not solve Edna's perplexity, powerless to change the male-centered society. So the deep sea is Edna's final choice.

The Awakening was originally titled "A Solitary Soul". "Solitary" means aloneness and loneliness. Aloneness is a state of mind, where one can balance the outside world with his inner peace. In this novel, Edna and Reize try to find aloneness in their minds, which unfortunately brings about deep loneliness. Aloneness is completely different from loneliness. Loneliness is a feeling that dread and fear affect somebody, deprived of companions, whereas aloneness represents individuality, independence and awakening. Edna enjoys the moment of aloneness. During Mr. Pontellier's absence, a temporary peace settled on her when she is alone. The feeling of the great relief is unfamiliar but attractive and delicious, which is exactly what she wants. However, the great loneliness tortures her when she pursues aloneness. After she awakes from the temporal society, she is solitary, illustrated by her relationship with her husband, her lover, her friends, her parents and her children. She fails to get along with them harmoniously. It is impossible for her to live in this world, filled with norms and regulations. All these results from her pursuit of self-realization and independence. The voice of the sea, as whispering, murmuring and soaring is seduces her to the abysses of solitude and loneliness.

5.2 Inevitability of Edna's Suicide

After reading the novel, lots of readers of different colors may not be satisfied with the ending. They wonder whether Edna's is inevitable and whether there exists other option. What about

reconciling with her husband, staying with Robert or living alone? But it will betray the point of the novel and the nature of Edna. After her awakening, she starts seeking selfhood and independence, which are contradictory to wifedom and mother. It is impossible for her to be possessed by Mr. Pontellier continuously. It should be noticed that Robert is no better than Mr. Pontellier in nature. Robert is just a norm man who dare not challenge the moral codes. What's worse, he fails to understand her awakening. However, it seems that the final option sounds good. Living away from New Orleans, painting alone is nice. In the novel, Reisz lives in this way. And Edna does not aspire after her life.

All in all, if Edna chooses any option of the above, Edna is Edna, who is unique. To her, death is a new rebirth and a relief from perplexity. In fact, her death is not occasional. At the beginning of swimming, she can expect for her destiny. Facing the situation of conflicts between selfhood and motherhood, freedom and wifedom, as well as her awakening and moral duties, the only solution is death. Although readers are disappointed with the ending, it is reasonable to understand Edna's death. If readers just attribute her death to her disappointing love, which is a something superficial, readers will miss Chopin's deep intention in *The Awakening*. The following part will explore the essential reasons of her death systematically.

Firstly, in the patriarchal society, women's self-realization is doomed to fail owing to traditional morality and conventions. In that century, women, especially the Creole, were governed by rules. And an unmoral woman cannot be accepted. The moral blame and psychological fragmentation result in Edna's death. Although Edna's mental and social pursuit is not successful, she still represents the consciousness of new woman and being new woman who will sacrifice life if necessary.[8]

Secondly, the lack of support and emotional resources leads her to suicide. In male-dominated society, she has to possess the "courageous soul" and the "strong wings" as Reisz tells her. Courage is not enough to challenge rooted conventions. Unfortunately, she has no strong wings or no emotional resources. Edna's father, Kentucky Colonel, tortured his wife to death when Edna was young, trying to control every talk. Edna's husband, Leonce, views Edna as his property, never caring about what she thinks. What he expects is to make Edna a mother-woman and a true woman. As to Robert, he fails to understand her awakening and takes the initiative to decide whether to depart her or to be with her. He is not as bold as Edna to challenge the whole society. With respect to Arobin, a playboy, he always wants to control her thoughts. Surrounded by these dirty dogs, Edna is hopeless and powerless on her way to awakening.

Edna is not comfortable with the responsibility of wife and mother. But she can't change the atmosphere of the whole society. The only solution for her is to escape the responsibility. The conflict between her self-sacrifice and self-realization is a shackle she can't cast off. After she moves into "the pigeon house", though the thrilling feeling comforts her, the frightening uncertainty still influences her. Freedom is like the ocean, exciting but dangerous. Lacking the strong wings as well as psychological and emotional resources, Edna is lost in this way. Her deep depression finally leads to her death. However, the death is the fact that she is the master of her own destiny. And the death symbolizes her spiritual freedom, character integrity and forever existence.

6. Conclusion

The Awakening is generally viewed as a woman's novel, and Edna serves as the representative to struggle for self-realization and freedom in the patriarchal society. As Dyer believes, the awakening is a beginning of selfness instead the ending.[9] From the above studies of the psychological conflicts, perplexities and awareness of Edna, to realize self-identity and independence is tough in the male-dominated society. The pioneer woman with her own dream is not allowed to have a life of her own. Edna insists on her own way to realize her physical, spiritual and ultimate awakening. Some scholars point out that Edna has to make a choice whether her life is worth living on her own, and her behavior represents that it is not. Therefore, the open end of this novel reflects Chopin's expectation instead of disappointment.

As a forerunner of American literature, Chopin always thinks about the question of motherhood,

wifehood, independence, life and death. But she has no way to solve the conflicts between women's self-sacrifice and self-realization. She fails to realize that the cause of female independence calls for the joint effort of human race. Actually, women in modern society still live in dilemma, the conflict between self-identity and being a wife or mother. However, women should strive for interests instead of their husband or children as well as learn to balance their social duties and selfhood and to deal with perplexities in the process of their strong pursuit. To sum up, women's emancipation and independence expect for cooperative efforts of the whole world, instead of women themselves.

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