

Naturalism in Kate Chopin's The Awakening: A Reconsideration

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ABSTRACT

This paper revolves around a significant subject matter that created controversial representations among critics and readers of the Victorian era because it was not in line with their conservative attitudes and aspirations. It is the subject matter of a young wife who has slapped the door behind social conventions and traditions now considered outdated, whose violation by Edna, the protagonist of the novel *The Awakening* (1899) was considered by others a social trauma and by the protagonist and the author, Kate Chopin, an awakening conducive to free life. Hence, a great deal of controversy has resulted in pros and cons, for some have been shocked by Edna's immoral behavior exposed obviously and openly which was regarded as a kind of transgression of the Victorian mores—negative, offensive and shocking—and some have admired the novel for its stunning style and have, at the same time, excused Edna and considered her obliged to take the course she has chosen. The reconsideration of the topic of this study has been triggered by the fact that this study is based on the naturalistic approach of the novel that is designed by the French novelist and critic Émile Zola, the founder of Naturalism in literature and the author of the naturalistic novel *Therese Raquin* in which he elaborates on the influence of environment, social conditions, hereditary factors and sexual impulses on character and action. Interestingly enough, sexual impulses and practices are part and parcel of the human character. They are not commented upon when they are hidden, but they are scandalous when they become blatant. In a word, the main theme of *The Awakening* is related to the concept of disillusionment embedded in the theme of the awakening of the protagonist.

KEYWORDS: Naturalism, Kate Chopin, Awakening, Reconsideration.

1. Introduction

The Awakening, from a symbolic perspective, is a novel exposing the protagonist Edna Pontellier that becomes very well aware of her dilemma that lies in the discrepancy between what she considers to be her freedom and the uncompromising principles of society that are imposed on nineteenth-century women: "Edna awakens to the need to escape temporal limitations" (Witherow, 2000, p vi). She has been trapped in a situation where she cannot be both a woman with her aspirations as an independent human being with a free mind and a mother. But she finds her sense of freedom in her decision to end her life in the sea. Interestingly enough, it is not only Edna's awakening—a self-discovery—of a woman who becomes aware of the sense of freedom, but it is also the awakening of the Victorian woman's sense of independence.

2. Discussion

It is significant to realize that the Victorian society which is known for its conservativeness was shocked by the appearance of a novel in 1899 whose main concern is to deal with

matters of sex on the part of a woman, mother and wife, who seeks libidinous relationships with men other than her husband. To the disappointment of the publisher, the novel was not warmly received by the public that rejected the illicit love affair of a mother and wife.

It is significant to realize a brief account of the most significant events that occur in *The Awakening*, which directly affect the character and action of the protagonist. The action of novel takes place in Grand Isle of the 1810s, in a resort haunted by tourists, which is located near to New Orleans. Here, the protagonist Edna Pontellier is on vacation with her husband Léonce. They reside with their two sons in at a cottage belonging to Madame Lebrun. Her husband is handsome. He is often busy with his job. From the naturalistic and psychological perspective Edna lacks that kind of sexual gratification a husband could afford, which would definitely affect the course of the development of her personality as a wife. Thus, his frequent visits to his family ruin his passionate relation with her. So, Edna spends most of her time with the charming Adèle Ratignolle, a married woman with an elegant appearance. The new environment, as it will be shown later, has important effects on Edna.

Edna learns so many things about the life of the people living in the new environment. She recognizes the kind of freedom women are enjoying, for they are behaving in an unreserved way and having freedom of expression. Being exposed to such a kind of environment in which women enjoy a great deal of freedom, Edna feels the need for liberation from the restrictions and repressions previously imposed upon her personality. The new change in Edna's personality is the result of the new environment and the new people surrounding her, which is one of the features of Naturalism, not to mention the other factors such as the sexual impulse, education and lack of sentimental emotions and intimacy due to the absence of her husband.

As her relationship with Adèle continues, Edna's aspirations for freedom begin to quickly increase, so she begins to feel that she should wake up from her sleep, metaphorically speaking, and that she feels a self-discovery, because of the new ideals of freedom she learns from her friend. Her awakening and self-discovery is the central theme of the novel. Edna's openness to the new world leads her to be introduced to Robert Lebrun, Madame

Lebrun's elder single son who is known among the vacationers there as a person who chooses a married woman every year whom he attends all summer long. During this summer he allots his time to Edna. Often accompanied by Adele, they lounge and talk together by the shore. As their relation develops, Edna begins to feel that she has become more vigorous than before. She begins to paint again and learns to swim, and at the same time she becomes very aware of her sexuality and independence as well. Thus, the Darwinian theory of libidinous cravings is made quite clear as to the behavior of Edna. By this time, Edna is still innocent, but one night she feels sad with her husband and very happy during her moments of independence. They have not yet discussed their love, and Edna returns to New Orleans, having a new personality. Meanwhile Robert disappears from Grand Isle to avoid making love to Edna.

When Edna comes back to New Orleans, she keeps painting, and she does not care for all her social relationships, being an independent woman. Because he worries about the situation of his wife and the future of his two sons, Leonce asks Doctor Mandelet, the family physician, for help and guidance. Due to his intelligence, Doctor Mandelet doubts that Edna; a change can be attributed to an affair, but he does not disclosed his doubts to her husband. Doctor Mandelet advises Leonce not to control her behavior lest the situation should lead to a rebellion, so Leonce lets Edna alone at home while he goes to business.

Edna rejects her previous lifestyle, with her husband and children away from her. Thus, she begins to reside in a home of her own and shows herself as an independent woman. Though her love for Robert is still intense, she decides to have an affair with the seducer of the town, Alcee Arobin, who is young enough to gratify her sexual appetite. She continues to pursue her sexual affair with this man, satisfying the cheap desire of the flesh and her animalistic urges, at the time she still keeps her freedom from the domination of the male sex.

Mademoiselle Reisz, the self-reliant and untraditional pianist, takes Edna as her protégée, informing her of the importance of independence for the artist who should sacrifice for arts. Edna is influenced by Mademoiselle Reisz who has devoted the whole of her life to arts; she is the only woman who has learned about Edna's relation with Robert and

encouraged her to continue her process of independence. Because of this influence, Edna insists upon her practice of awakening and independence.

Robert returns to New Orleans and admits to Edna that he cannot continue his relation with her simply because she is a married woman, but the latter explains her new lifestyle that denies that denies the rights of her husband towards her and that they can together undergo a happy and peaceful life. Despite Edna's insistence, Robert finds it impossible to commit a sexual sin with her.

Edna leaves Robert for Adele who undergoes a serious childbirth, asking him to stay until she returns. During her interactions with Edna, Adele senses that the new state of Edna is discouraging, and she advises her to take care of her husband and children. Also Doctor Mandelet shows his concern about Edna who then feels that she has already selfishly behaved.

Edna discovers that Robert has already deserted her and begins to think that Robert will not sexually satisfy her. Then, she considers the situation of her and senses that she is now suffering from loneliness. She does not feel that she belongs to the world due to her solitude. She comes back to Grand Isle. She remembers her passionate moments there and yields to the sea, thinking of her independence and freedom from her family. It may be suggested that her suicide is either a cowardly action or an action of freedom; it may be a cowardly action because she feels that she is unable to cope with her present circumstances as an oppressed wife and a mother and to proceed with a husband unable to gratify her sexual desires; or it is an action of freedom because she thinks that she is now able to do any action, even suicide, as an expression of her freedom and independence, not to mention her free thinking. Thus, the influence of circumstance on her personality is quite evident, which is one of the significant ingredients of Naturalism.

The Awakening becomes a very-well known novel among the literary media during the second half of the twentieth century, being explored by many critics and widely read by readers, and at the same time it has tremendously been "subjected to the heavy artillery of theoretical and cultural analyses" (Pizer Donald, 2001: 5). It has been suggested that the

novel needs to be thoroughly examined from the perspective of the naturalistic literary movement, for it consists of many naturalistic elements and reflects Chopin's awareness of the principles of this movement:

I wish, in this brief essay, to suggest the need in any account of the work to keep to the forefront what I will call its "plain meaning"--that is, the central and powerfully depicted themes which arise out of the relationship of the novel to literary naturalism, the principal innovative movement in American fiction of the 1890s.

(Pizer Donald, 2001: 5)

Thus, *The Awakening* appears to be responsive to the new ideas of the time in which it is written, which pertain to the naturalistic movement in literature, especially the novel. Chopin, as suggested by Donald, has got full understanding of the principal ideas and fictional aspirations considered new in her time, and she has got full understanding of the ideas of Charles Darwin and the naturalists that have been figured out in France: "she did seek within her own milieu of middle-class Creole life to dramatize, as did Crane, Norris, and Dreiser, the limitations placed on the human will by the biological and social realities within which the will attempts to find its way" (Pizer: 5). Furthermore, it is necessary to mention that Chopin, unlike other naturalistic writers, has never "set her fiction within the brutish and sordid urban working class world" (Pizer: 5). In New Orleans, Edna finds herself unable to enjoy her rebirth into an independent woman with a free mind.

It may be assumed that Edna has awakened from her death-in-life reality as a wife and mother from the middle class as she begins to communicate with the newly introduced friends in Grand Isle; her new change of personality comes as a result of the new environment in which she has spent some time. It seems that the new environment of Grand Isle with its beautiful nature and society and the sea have their true impacts on her transfiguration:

In Grand Isle, both nature and society appear to endorse the process of self-transformation she will fully undertake in New Orleans. The sea, as the context for the liberating freedom and sensuality Edna finds in the act of swimming,

both 'speaks to the soul' and 'enfolds the body in its soft,
close embrace'

(Pizer: 5-6)

Edna's personality has quickly developed due to her intimacy with the images of nature—the sea in which she swims and feels that spirit of independence where there are no shackles to restrict her like the ones imposed upon her by her husband and children. Moreover the new social relationships have their impacts on her and have obliged her to form a new character due to her awakening.

Another influence that has influenced and thwarted Edna's character and action is her husband's frequent visits which deprive her from full comfort and sexual gratification. Nevertheless, her relaxation in the new environment in summer resorts gives her the chance to make new relationships with people and a free movement:

in Mademoiselle Reisz's passionate artistry at the piano and Robert Lebrun's increasing interest in her she find instances of the liberating emotional intensity of art and love and thus the possibility of using them as vehicles for the confirmation of her personal identity. In short, Edna has awakened not only to the truth of her own stifled selfhood but also to the seeming possibility of finding expressive means for discovering and affirming who she is in the natural and social worlds she inhabits.

(Pizer: 6)

Yet, Edna's new identity that has already formed by the new circumstances and environment—the natural and social worlds which she has recently discovered—could have given her a clear message that she could exert her efforts to bring about the kind of life that could have made her live a comfortable life that is independent and self-directed. But she has decided to commit suicide because she has ignored all these possibilities and found that she has been thwarted by her old natural and social conditions. Interestingly enough, it seems that Adele Ratignolle can be considered Edna's foil because Adele is always satisfied by the kind of life she is living, and at the same time she respects and glorifies the state of motherhood. The difference between the two personalities can be attributed to their biological differences according to the naturalistic stand in this respect.

According to Witherow (2000, pp. v-vi), *The Awakening* has been inspired by many and various representations such as the writings of Charles Darwin and the literary movement called Naturalism. Naturalism has drawn much from Darwin who advocates an objective study of the character of man that is restricted by his passions, hereditary factors, environment whatsoever, and a pessimistic point of view concerning his life of. To place the novel within the domain of Naturalism, it should be mentioned that Edna, the protagonist of the novel, has been governed by her passions, and at the same time her surroundings have a great impact on her personality, especially the Grand Isle where she begins to think of her female independence and the need for sexual gratification which her husband's absence has deprived her of. At the end of the novel, Edna seems to be unable to determine what kind of life she should lead, which makes her feel alienated from the world in which she is living, and which leads to her final catastrophe—suicide.

It is indicated in the novel that Edna aspires to be an artist throughout her paintings, but she has not brought about her dream of being an artist because of the restrictions imposed upon her by her conditions, being a mother-woman, a wife responsible for her household, which does not allow her to greatly focus on her ambitions and aspirations—she often appears to be depressed. Therefore, it may be suggested that Edna could have rebelled against the social conventions and traditions, but her act to commit suicide can be interpreted in terms of a victory over those factors which she regards as enslaving and imprisoning her identity as a free human being.

Sheri Metzger (2001, p. 9) asserts that *The Awakening* falls within the domain of the literary movement called Naturalism which advocates the biological and socioeconomic influences on the character and action of man; that is, the choices of man are determined by powers beyond his control—“determinism that predicts the choices that each individual makes about his or her life” (Metzger, p. 9).

As an attempt to depict life faithfully, Chopin finds it important to rely on her own experience during the time she spent in St. Louis when she felt that she was an independent person. She depicts Edna's character as an outsider looking at the world surrounding a heroine and presenting her portrait as one that is scandalous. It may be suggested then that Chopin tries to create a life typical of the one experienced by her. Thus, she attempts to

“create her own life, such as instituting a literary salon to replace all the other social visits society expected her to pay. However, unlike Edna, Chopin was very much at home in her independence” (Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2016). As a result, because *The Awakening* deals with the harsh realities of life that touch every other individual at the time when it was written, it has not welcomed by critics, and at the same time it had not warmly welcomed by readers either. It was condemned by critics when its first version appeared because the novel advocated an independent life for a heroine tortured by her family life despite the fact that she appears to be a wife sexually neglected by her husband and deprived of her freedom and independent life; she is presented as a woman looking forward to having “independence and emotional, sexual, and spiritual awakening” (Harcourt, 2016). Nevertheless, when the novel was read within the 1960s-context, it was radically and enthusiastically welcomed as a sound yet genuine fictional art, and at the same time, Edna’s scandal, which put the novel down by critics and readers at the time of its publication, becomes something preposterous. Furthermore, Edna comes to be considered one hundred years ahead of her time, for she is the new woman of the twentieth century, reflecting her independent sexual drives as any other woman of the modern Occidental world, a representative of the modern American culture. She shows

no interest in any cause other than her own intensely personal agenda, her rejection of the mother-woman role, exploration of her sexuality with men other than her husband, and indifference to the opinions of mainstream society make her threatening indeed to those readers who wished women would remain at home.

(Harcourt, 2016)

It seems that Edna was born in a society in which she had been cast in by means of a role imposed upon her, and that she felt that she had to free herself from its shackles. Thus, environment and the surrounding people in which they are living have their significant impact on her character and action. She does not want to be like those women trapped in Louisiana with its strict social system, environment and conventions.

It has been pointed out that Chopin's disinclination to give judgment "using the established moral codes may have stemmed from the scientific advancements of the last half of the 1880s" (Harcourt, 2016). The allusion here is made to the new ideas brought by Charles Darwin, which had made a change or at least an essential challenge concerning how people thought about the essence of their identity, the place from which they had come, the place which they had to go to, and the circumstances they have to go through, as explicated in the following passage:

The very idea of evolution necessitated a fundamental shift in thinking, casting previously ironclad ideas into doubt. So, too, does Chopin depict Edna's shift in perspective as causing an irreparable break with her former life, disallowing the possibility that she can simply move back into Léonce's house and resume her limiting life.

(Harcourt, 2016)

The unhappy ending of the heroine can be attributed to Chopin's approach which puts her within the domain of the naturalist novelist movement which appeared as an established one in the first half of the nineteenth century. This unpleasant ending is one feature of naturalism which advocates that the ending of the novel should resemble any ending that occurs in actual life—an ending irrelevant to artistic conventions. The novel shows that the fate of character should resemble anyone living in the actual world and facing similar circumstances; that is the hero or the heroine is not a traditional one that triumphs at the end of the novel as is the case with Charles Dickens' novel *Great Expectations* which starts with unhappy circumstances on the part of the protagonist and ends happily: Edna's unhappy ending is a "feature [that] places *The Awakening* in the naturalist school of writing" (Harcourt, 2016).

It is worth mentioning that Chopin does not interfere with the personality of Edna, thus presenting her in an objective manner and letting her behave according to her impulses as a human being, which is one of the main features of naturalism. Therefore, Edna, appears to be acting according to naturalism which shows that the human being is controlled by force beyond his control:

Established in the last half of the nineteenth century, Naturalist and the closely associated Realist literature held that writing should offer an objective, empirical presentation of the human experience. Naturalism required an amoral stance towards a character's actions and aspirations—but nonetheless expected the worst both for and from the character. The influence of Darwin's theories on naturalism resulted in the sentiment that humans have little control over themselves or the forces that shape their lives, but must struggle to survive, prospering only at the expense of others.

(Harcourt, 2016)

According to Jean Ann (2000: 18), *The Awakening* reflects the tendency towards the naturalistic approach in so far as Edna decides not to yield to the boundaries surrounding her. Furthermore, it seems that at that time society has limited her independent body and soul, not to mention the natural forces imposed upon her and the fact that she should take care of her children begotten by an indifferent husband

Steven T. Ryan (1998: 254) agrees with the idea that Chopin has been fascinated by the principles of naturalism, especially the Darwinian representations which have their impacts on the portrayal of Edna's character and action: "Edna's sexual awakening is a product of a biological imperative" (Ryan, 1998:254). Throughout the novel, Edna appears to be fluctuating between independence and determinism, which has imposed upon her a great tension. Critics agree together that *The Awakening* is characterized by deterministic naturalism; to support this view, Barbara Hochman (1995: 212) declares that the novel shows the circumstantial and environmental influences on the protagonist. She says that *The Awakening* "nearly exemplifies the 'naturalistic' plot of individual decline, with its concern for the pressures of environment and circumstance, and its focus on forces (both inner and outer) beyond the control of the characters" (Hochman: 212). It may be added that Edna's awakening is the result of her sensual impulses which pertains to the naturalist principle that man is governed by his/her sensual cravings, not to mention the fact that Edna also begins to think that she should be an independent woman. As to her death, it is no wonder that a person commits suicide according to their wishes, which can be

considered something natural, an event that frequently shows its occurrences in actual life. Thus, the naturalist representations are to govern the action of the novel in that Edna's decision of suicide comes as a result of the naturalistic impacts over the inner emotions and the external influences of the protagonist. At the same time, one can suggest that Edna's profound sentiments of love have been influenced yet ignited by her natural desires related to the animalistic biological drives of man, for her erotic nature is made very vivid in the novel. It may be assumed that Chopin attempts to manifest the sensual aspects of Naturalism.

The natural surroundings of the new place in which Edna begins to spend a certain time have their sensual impacts on her character. The natural symbols cannot be overlooked in this respect:

That natural symbolism [that] abounds throughout the novel cannot for one moment be doubted. The problem lies with the sense in which the reader wishes to construe the natural symbolism and themes: either as libidinal passion and obstinacy of a self-centered female, or as a personal transcendent outreach toward greater self-fulfillment.

(Adil A. Ahmed, 1974: 3)

It may be suggested therefore that the novel reflects a mixture of both sensual and natural impulses on the part of the heroine. Edna does not take care for the ethical principles that prevail among her people, whose behavior as a mother and wife seeking sex and independence is regarded as an anomalous behavior in her time. The natural symbols that play a greater part in changing Edna's personality are significantly the land, the sea and the birds, which are symbols of the kind of liberty Edna wants to enjoy. Ahmed presumes that Chopin may have gone beyond the aim of Naturalism, for

Edna does not seek sensual gratification only. She is a complex woman who tries to be happy in her life. In her desire to find happiness, she is completely unhindered by considerations for her family or for her honor. She tries to transcend the restraints that society places on everybody.

Thus, Kate Chopin mingles naturalism with transcendentalism to embody her artistic vision.

(Ahmed: 3-4)

Therefore, the influence of the natural surroundings, the sea, the sand, the birds and the sky can be considered forceful character acting on Edna in her attempt to change the style of her life, a style rejected by the Victorian ideals. Thus, a thorough glance at the influence of the natural surroundings and the circumstances facing the protagonist should be taken into consideration so as to unfold their fatalistic influence. Therefore, one can recognize that Chopin uses symbolic and naturalistic elements in order to unfold the persistent struggle of the protagonist against society.

At the end of the novel, the protagonist walks naked on the shore of the sea, which reflects Edna's new point of view concerning her life as an independent woman seeking to do whatever she likes:

[Edna] stood naked in the open air, at the mercy of the sun, the breeze that beat upon her, and the waves that invited her. How strange and awful it seemed to stand naked under the sky! How delicious! She felt like some new-born creature, opening its eyes in a familiar world that it had never known.. . . The foamy wavelets curled up to her white feet, and coiled like serpents about her ankles.

(*The Awakening* 113)

It seems that Chopin goes beyond the limited aspects of naturalism, seeking to portray not only the awakening of a woman by means of her sensual aspirations, but she also tries to signify the manifestations of nature as a universal entity affecting man's character and action. Here is the mingling of Edna's wishes to transcend the world in which she is living and becomes part of nature that endows her with freedom and independence: "Chopin's use of literary naturalism was, in a fuller sense, one that sought to transcend gross human nature in search of greater universal meaning (Ahmed: 5). Therefore, Edna's sensuality is depicted against the naturalistic background to show the influence of the naturalistic representations embedded in the influences of environment and circumstances, and to

depict those beautiful natural objects which have significant impacts on a character like Edna's.

3. Conclusion

Chopin's *The Awakening* is focused on how biological, social, and environmental, not to mention the bodily impulses have forced Edna, the heroine, to do the kind of action that she has done and that can by no means be expected yet accepted by the social standards of her time, and that leads to her tragic end. In this regard, her attempt to confront the prevailing beliefs, conventions and traditions may in one way or another contribute to the shaping factors of the modern culture of Western societies. Hence, social, environmental and biological ingredients—the essentials of Naturalism--have their impact on the protagonist, which determine her tragic end.

Despite the fact that *The Awakening* was despised in its time by critics who considered it a novel depicting a protagonist with unusual behavior—a behavior incompatible with the social norms society used to cope with, the novel got its established stand in the twentieth century when social ideals transformed into agreeable ones.

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