

## Marxist Feminism in *The Awakening*

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### Abstract

*The Awakening* describes a story in which Edna Pontellier, the heroine, who dissatisfied her identity in the society and bravely to pursuit love, self-independence and freedom. From the perspective of Feminist, the thesis try to use Maxis Feminism analyze *The Awakening*, find out the economic factors appeared into the novel, especially discussed the heroine's feminism from the currently views. Besides the introduction and conclusion, this thesis consists of two sections which present the introduction of Feminism and Marxist Feminism, some plots and characters in the novel which also showed the feminism, from which use the Marx Feminism approach to analyze.

**Key words:** Marxist feminism; *The Awakening*; Feminist theory

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### INTRODUCTION

In the late 1800s, a movement in the writing of American women began. Women were beginning to assert themselves in society as a whole, as well as in the literary world. They chose to write about more bold topics than they ever had before, such spiritual and emotional longings which are seen in *The Awakening*, which published in 1899. During that time period, the Feminism has not already recognised by the public when

Chopin write this short novel, the moral presented in her novel definitely shocked the readers and leave a great controversy, her brilliant work of fiction was forbid to publish.

The main character Edna she described in the novel, who is refuse her duties of being a wife in the family, wants to pursue a real life without her husband, children, and being independent, but failed and commit suicide. In American society at that century, they never heard of this kind of thing, women, particularly upper-class women, were supposed to adhere to the concept of Republican Motherhood (the idea that American women were meant to stay home and train their children to be good American citizens), which was still strong in the late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries. Chopin challenges these ideals.

### 1. FEMINISM

Feminist is concerned with the marginalization of all women: That is, with their being neglected to a secondary position, examine the experiences of women from all races and classes and cultures. They stand up to against the patriarchal culture and discovered the imbalance between man and woman in many different aspects, including politics, woman's experience or sexuality, etc.. These woman writers use feminism to defend their positions in the literature. As in the work of Marxist feminists, they exhibit a powerful political orientation. Feminism is not just a theory but a very important revolution in the modern time. They study sexual, social, and political issues.

Feminists first pay much attention to the female writers who are ignored by the public for the role of women in the society. Elaine Showalter, one of the best American critics, has categorized three historical phases of women's literature development. The "femine" phase (1840-1880), during which women writers imitated the dominant tradition; the "feminist" phase (1880-1920), during which women advocated minority rights and protested; and the

“female” phase (1920-present), during which dependency on opposition—that is, on uncovering misogyny in male texts—is being replaced by a rediscovery of women’s texts and women (p.198). In the book *The Feminine Mystique*, Friedan described the dominant image of the happy American suburban housewife. Her book shows us new woman’s organizations, manifestos, protests and publications that called for end to sex discrimination and enforcement of equal right.

Kristeva refuses to give the word “woman” a definition. “When Kristeva does define feminine specificity, she turns out to have a biological specificity in mind: women’s role in reproduction.” (Jones, 1984, p.62) In her view, men create the world of power and representation, while women create babies. Elaine Showalter identifies four models of difference: biological, linguistic, psychoanalytic, and cultural. In her view, male and female are different in their physical body, speech which women imitated men, the relation of gender to the artistic process, concerns in social contexts, acknowledging class, racial, national and historical differences and determinants among women.

There are four types of approaches currently most pervasive in feminist criticism: gender studies, Marxist feminism, Psychoanalytic Feminism, and Minority Feminism. Latter we will discuss the Marxist feminism in *The Awakening*.

## 2. THE FEMINISM OF THE AWAKENING

Chopin’s work which concluded attitudes of characters about gender, used the main character, imagery and Edna’s suicide to illustrate her feminism, which is very hard to the audience to accept during Chopin’s time period, she believed people at that time are trust in patriarchal culture, women who are weak, dependent on man and has one only position lay nothing above mothering and housework, as same as Madame Ratignolle and Lenonce in the novel, who was also acceptable in society.

Chopin use the contrasting characters of Madame Reisz and Edna in an effort to express urges and desires disguised by the female gender. Lenonce Pontellier, Edna’s husband, is depicted as the typical male of the time period. As Chopin describes when he left home to New Orleans, “Mr. Pontellier was a great favorite and ladies, men, children, even nurses, were always on hand to say good-bye to him” (Chopin, 1899, p.9). Leonce considers his wife as his personal possession and a companion with him to attend social activities. In the very beginning of the novel, Leonce stares at his burnt wife, “looking at his wife as one looks at a valuable piece of property which has suffered some damage” (Ibid., p.3).

From Mr. Pontellier’s view, it seems that Edna’s responsibility as a wife is listen to her husband’s rambling stories and care for her children at all time. As Lenonce wondered, “If it was not a mother’s place to look after her

children, whose on earth was it?” (Ibid., p.7). But Edna wouldn’t want to have such a “boring” life, so that Leonce becomes extremely discouraged with his wife, that she “who was the sole object of his existence, evinced so little interest in things which concerned him and valued so little his conversation”. However, it is not uncommon at the time for a man to consider his wife to be under his control. He also claimed, “she’s got some sort of notion in her head concerning the eternal rights of women; and you understand—we meet in the morning at the breakfast table.” (Ibid., p.88). Perhaps it was because of the society in which he had grown up in that Leonce could not comprehend the changes in his wife and even thinks she is demented. But Mr. Pontellier is not a sexist man who was considerably to his wife, and a good husband in every one’s eye. Edna was “forced to admit that she knew of none better” (Ibid., p.9).

Edna Pontellier is different from other women, she has many non-traditional attitudes in regard to herself for a mother, a woman, she was not considered herself a “mother-woman”. She rejected her role in the society violently because she realized it would lose many wonderful things, she just wants to be herself. She claims to feel sometimes wandering though her life unguided and unthinking, which was not a proper attitude for a woman of her time period to have. Edna also does not have the feelings towards her children that it was assumed she should, as she sometimes “she would gather them passionately to her heart and she would sometimes forget them” (Ibid., p.25). Edna also chooses a negative attitude towards marriage. “She says a wedding is one of the most lamentable spectacles on earth” (Ibid., p.89), and later stamps her wedding ring as if it stands for the permanent bond she wants to break it. She does not intend to communicate with her husband and also not appear to miss him when he is away for long period of time. As matter of fact, her marriage does not mean anything to her that she thinks it is an accident which had no passion for it. Chopin uses her description of clothing to emphasize the difference of Edna. She is clothed in lawn dresses, city dresses, a peignoir and a bathing suit throughout the novel.

She does not wear the confining dresses such as Madame Ratignolle and the “mother-women” do. The contrast between Edna’s attire and Madame Ratignolle’s attire highlight the personality differences between the two women.

Madame Reisz’s character is used to show what happened in society during this time period if a woman decided to be unconventional. She chose not to have children, and because of her decisions, Madame Reisz is destined to a lonely and pessimistic lifestyle. Her life, however, is her own and does not belong to anyone else’s. Edna admires Madame Reisz about this and gradually her life style was becoming the same.

In the awakening, Edna has many changes. She discovers a sense of independence and directly shows this

though her emotions and rebellion against her husband and children. She also experiences a sexual “awakening” as a result of her love for Robert and an adulterous affair with Arobin. Edna’s life is changed so drastically that she realizes there is no way for her to live a normal life and be happy any longer.

Edna’s sense of independence is portrayed in the description of her feelings throughout the novel. It was also appearing evidently she has found freedom when she fights against her husband and the norms of society. Edna first feels free when she swims into the ocean for the first time. This is a turning point in her life, as she is able to swim off on her own, with the desire to “swim where no woman had ever swum before” (Ibid., p.37). Edna continues to indulge in this new-found freedom when she disobeys her husband’s requests to join him inside later that night. “She perceived that her will have blazed up, stubborn and resistant. She could not be at that moment have done other than denied and resisted” (Ibid., p.42).

Edna becomes angry with her marriage, her husband and children who restrained her life. Because of them, she could not do what she truly desires to do. She stamps her wedding ring and tells her husband that marriage is “despicable”, and refused attention to her children under other people’s control. However, Edna realizes that these actions are useless and makes up her mind that she shall just do as what she wanted, do not regard her family any more. Then she leaves home where she is not feeling like home, otherwise it is Mr. Pontellier’s home and it is his money which pays for it, not her own. She claims that the home never quite seemed like her own and declares that she like the feeling of freedom and in dependency. Edna also relieves herself of the social conventions which her husband finds necessary. Edna begins to enjoy her new independent life without Leonce. She grows accustomed to doing things on her own and finding her own friends and begins to spend time with a new group of people. Every step which she took toward relieving herself from obligations added to her strength and expansion as an individual. “She began to look with her own eyes; to see and to apprehend the deeper undercurrents of life” (Ibid., p.127).

Edna allows a sense of independence to swell within her, openly claiming she will no longer be anyone’s possession and she shall walk alone. Through her death, she acquires the ultimate feeling of independence. She feels free from every restraint placed upon her, and knows that she is her own person.

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### **3. MARXIST FEMINISM AND THE AWAKENING**

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Marxist feminist criticism focuses on the relation between reading and social realities. Karl Marx asserted that all historical and social development are determined by forms of economic production. Since the Marxists emphasize

historical and economic contexts of literary discourse, they often direct attention toward the conditions of production of literary texts, i.e. the economics of publishing and distributing texts. In *The Awakening*, the distribution of economics is not obvious, or indirectly to show the reader, like the description of environment of character to indicate what the financial background of character, this is necessarily for us to learn. At the very beginning, Chopin described “He walked down the gallery and across the narrow “bridge” which connected the Lebrun cottages one with the other (Ibid., p.1). Which showed and the family of Mr. Pontellier has a big house, and later we can see they have piano can play, many nurses, Mr. Pontellier smoke cigar, intend to go over to Klein’s hotel and play a game of billiards, etc., which all revealed that they live in a middle or upper class at that time. This identity is little description but crucial for the novel, that a novel could not be written without it. And also the different economic background formed different conception of people and conflicts could be showed under this circumstance.

What is “good” art for many Marxists is simply what people in a given society agree upon as good. In the novel, Adele Ratignolle is the epitome of the male-defined wife and mother. She is a “mother-woman” who were women who idolized their children, worshiped their husbands and esteemed it a holy privilege to efface themselves as individuals and grow wings as ministering angels. And most of people at that time think this kind of woman is normal and according to this criterion, they rejected the women who are not this kind, like Edna who finds that the life of the mother-woman fails to satisfy her desire for an existence free from definition. She pities Adele and finds herself unsuited for the lifestyle of the mother-woman. “It was not a condition of life which fitted her, and she could see in it but an appalling and hopeless ennui. She was moved by a kind of commiseration for Madame Ratignolle” (Ibid., p.63).

Marxism’s analysis of class into a women’s history of their material and economic oppression, and especially of how the family and the women’s domestic labor are constructed reproduce the sexual division of labor. We cannot separate questions of gender-stereotyping from their material conditions in history. The social and economic realities which play an important part in constructing gender roles. Husband and wife play different parts in the family, and the economic realities which definitely decided the importance of it. Husband also often shows his love to the wife by using money. “Robert is very well in a way, to give up all the money he can earn to the family, and keep the barest pittance for himself” (Ibid., p.65). Robert is the financial support for the family and his wife need not go out work, he give most of his money to Edna, at that time period, usually woman would rely on their husband and just do their responsibilities for the family, however, Edna is an exception, which inside the feminism developed with his husband’s care increase.

Where there is oppression, there is resistance. If women want to gain equal rights and status with men, the first thing they have to do is to be independent on the economy and to be the owners of their own. "I believe I thought to work again. I feel as if I wanted to be doing something" (Ibid., p.74). She realized that she needs to do something to change his lifestyle. Edna explores her newfound lifestyle by taking up gambling at the racetrack and beginning to sell her paintings. Entering the world of capitalism is a big step in her search for independence because until that point she had been, like most nineteenth century women. By infiltrating this masculine world, Edna is able to generate an income all her own and use the money she makes to rent a house. "I have little money of my own from my mother's estate, which my father sends me by driblets. I won a large sum this winter on the races, and I am beginning to sell my sketches" (Ibid., p.107). "I know I shall like it, like the feeling of freedom and independence". The unbalanced money distribution make Edna feel not freedom and independence, in order to complete her wish, the first step she should do be money independence. She rent the pigeon house, as she calls it, is a place far away from any reminders of her family life. Her final attempt to acquire the unfettered life of a man comes in the form of her affair with Alcee Arobin. In this relationship, Edna samples masculine sexual freedoms; however, something in Edna's nature makes it impossible for her to be fully satisfied with the masculine lifestyle.

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## CONCLUSION

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Feminist theory brings great innovation into western literary criticism, which broadens the scope of Feminism by enclosing gender, language, race, desire and maternity into unique Feminist theory. Up to now, more and more people becoming realize the importance of this novel. In a way, *The Awakening* opened the door for future discussion of feminism by female writers. It is also influenced many writers and reader's view about women, which signify for us to learn. Today we are fortunately can be her reader, and criticize her work with a different angle we can get different meanings.

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