

On the Artistic Features of *The Awakening* by Kate Chopin

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Abstract

Kate Chopin was one of the famous American feminist writers. Her famous work *The Awakening* is a song in praise of the fight for women's fate and worthy of a peculiar flower in American literature. The paper gives an analysis of the ideological content and artistic form of the novel. From the simple words of the description of the heroine Edna's solitary state in her relationship with others around her and with the objects as symbols about her, from the French in the novel, which is another unique feature, Chopin gives us a chance to appreciate a song in praise of the fight for women's fate and worthy of a peculiar flower in American literature.

Key words: Kate Chopin; Features of character; Figurative method; Symbols

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INTRODUCTION

Kate Chopin was one of the famous American feminist writer. When her magnum opus *The Awakening* was published in 1899, it received an overwhelmingly negative response, because it was about the awakening of psychological and sexual consciousness of a young woman. However after 50 years, the critical world began to reexamine this novel from the point of feminism and thought that she deserved an honorable position in the

American literature. The recognition of *The Awakening* in the American literature signals people's view at that time. Its publication cast a shadow over Kate Chopin and she only had another three short stories published in her life. Contemporary critics were predominately hostile toward the subject matter, but praised the artistry of the writing. And it was considered as a representative of feminism in the American literature, which was given the same fame as the Greek tragedy, Whitman's poems, Hawthorne's novels and Dreiser's *Sister Carrie*. Now let's see whether it is a grass or a peculiar flower.

1. BRIEF INTRODUCTION TO THE STORY

In 1899, Chopin's greatest literary success *The Awakening* was published. It created a scandal because of its portrayal of a strong, unconventional woman involved in an adulterous affair. It is about what happened to Edna Pontellier, the protagonist, after her marriage for six years. Edna is a middle-class woman. She is a two-children mother. And she could enjoy her expenditure fully. Six years after her marriage, with the influence of Robert, Edna has changed her lifestyle: she starts to think over herself and she has her own interests and expectations, and the like. At the same time, she gets to know she could not play only a role as a wife and mother in her life, and has to live independently and actively rather than relies on her husband. In her sense, she has to fight for herself and goes against the traditional way of life. So she is returned to Grand Isle, and she is determined to go for what she wants. She walks down to the beach and nakedly stands in the sun, then she jumped into the sea and soon she will disappear in the waves. After she is been awakening, she dies lonely but bravely as being herself rather than just as a woman.

2. THE FIGURATIVE METHOD

Edna, far ahead of her time, pointed out the problems of women and showed the anguish of men and women without any idea and love. She is regarded as one of the forerunners in the liberation of women and she is recognized as an honorable writer in American literary history today. At last, when she went into the deep sea, Leonce and the children came into her mind. Even though they were a part of her life, they could not dominate and control her physically or mentally. This implies the theme of the story. The fact she met him is her secret at the bottom of her heart. As most of men would do, he loved her, and he put his suit in a very charming manner with an aim to make her so fascinated with. He thought she was completely indulged in the imaging his behaviors and passion. However, she thinks all of those in an opposite way. The above tells us directly that there's no true love between Leonce and her. The reason why Leonce loves her and pleases her is just that he considers her as one of his properties. Leonce and Edna could not get well along with each other, because they have different values on different things, let alone the marriage thought. They get married just because of their physical conditions and material interests. In this situation, they could not understand each other in most aspects even in their daily life. Without having much in common, their marriage is doomed to be a failure.

Edna is a courageous and rebellious woman, and she would not get along with this lifestyle and wants to be herself as an independent and intact person. She starts to live in her own lifestyle and pursues what she desires and she knows clearly her own interests and aspiration. In this situation, she falls in love with Robert. And this awakening of her self-consciousness is illustrated in Chapter 10, she first learns how to swim, and that night when she can make her body float on the water for the first time, she suddenly realized she was reborn to be a baby who learns to walk for the first time and gets to know her power to do what she can do. She could not help laughing and shouting for fun and joy. At this time, she feels she is full of power and just as she is fully equipped with high-power engine to go where she wants physically and mentally at her desired speed. Therefore, she becomes more confident and courageous, but she somewhat goes beyond her limited power. She desired to swim as far as to somewhere any other women never could go before. It is this night that she first refuses to go inside to bed when her husband calls her, she is acknowledging that she can make choices in her life, no matter how trivial. No longer will she blindly obey what her husband tells her to do, instead she will decide what she wants when she wants. When she elegantly positions herself in the hammock, she throws herself in the sea of imagination: She had enough confidence to refuse to do what she was not willing to do, and she would choose to go against other's will and follow her own thought at that time. She clearly reminded her

husband spoke with her in that way and she followed his thought to do as he commanded, but she could not think of any reason why she did that way before. When she comes to this thought, she would rather deny and resisting doing that again at that time. Several days later, asleep for only a few troubled hours, Mrs. Pontellier wakes up early and without any forethought, goes over to Robert's house. For the first time, Mrs. Pontellier asks Robert to join her on a boat to the Cheniere Church. Robert doesn't say anything, but he is visibly pleased by Mrs. Pontellier's request. They have a standing breakfast and join the lovers, the lady in black, and Monsieur Farival on the boat. And their love increased a lot from then on. However, it is when they are psychologically in deep love Edna hears that Robert has suddenly decided to go to Mexico and is leaving that night. She is so unacceptable to Robert's sudden leave. In her mind, when Robert leaves, all happy and promising things will leave together with him and nothing is left for her. She thinks she could not put up with her boring life again, she even considers herself as a broken vase which seems not to be send out her glamor again. She tries to find him again everywhere she may go and talks with everything in every manner she feels she is really talking with him.

One Tuesday at dinner, however, Mrs. Pontellier is dressed casually and she didn't feel like receiving callers that day and just went out without leaving any sort of excuse. Upset that his wife is not fulfilling her social obligations, Mr. Pontellier asks to see the cards of the people who dropped that day, and he scolds his wife for not paying due respect to certain members of the social elite. Mr. Pontellier complains about the dinner and the cook. He refuses to eat his food and leaves abruptly to go to his club instead, she takes a thin handkerchief and tears it into pieces then rolls it into a ball to throw it out. Afterwards, she takes off her wedding ring and throws it on the carpet. She even steps on the ring with an intention to destroy it. All of a sudden, she could not help taking a glass vase from the table and throws it on the tiles of the hearth. She wants to destroy something to hear the sound of crash and clatter.

Now, after Robert's leaving, Edna thinks about how the color seems to have gone out of her life since Robert left and how she constantly wants to talk about him with other people. Frequently, she goes to Madame Lebrun's apartment and looks at baby pictures of Robert, seeing how the child developed into the man. And she does what she wants to do. When Mr. Pontellier is out on business, Edna took a determined measure that she moved out of her house to a smaller one just around the corner. At first, she justifies her plan by saying that her current house is too big and too much trouble for just one person, but after pressed, she reveals the true reason: she wants freedom and independence and believes that she can support herself with her racetrack winnings and by selling her sketches. When her husband returns, she wants to be

completely self-sufficient so that she will never again feel like someone else's possession. Edna promises to throw a huge party before she moves, she loves the pigeon house which is associated with a pleasant home on her side. She decorates it in the way she likes. She feels she is full of power and energy to do everything she desires and she has her own thought and view of things in her daily life. She feels her life is full of hopes and she is free from the old way of life which makes her so fed up. Robert's presence in town throws her into extremes of emotion. And one day they meet together. She asks if he is asleep and then kisses him. He responds and admits that his love for her was what kept him away from her for so long. He tells her that he could not pursue her because she was married and that he dreamed of Leonce setting her free to become his wife. She tells him that she is not a possession and can give herself to whomever she wants, which makes him turn a little pale. At this point, a servant comes with the message that Madame Ratignolle has gone into labor. Edna tells Robert to wait for her there, and before she leaves, they kiss passionately. Edna says that she loves Robert and he awoke her from a dream last summer, and that now they can live together forever. With Robert pleading with her not to leave, she says goodbye to him seductively. When she enters her house, she is excited to remember that Robert will be waiting there. However, much to her despair, she finds Robert gone and a brief note that says, "I love you. Good-by? because I love you." (p.148) Edna grew faint when she reads the words. And she lies on the sofa awake for the entire night. She felt Robert is her only desire in the world, and she clearly pictured the scene when she met him again with an indiscernible thought.

The next morning, Edna appears in the Grand Isle and went down to the water, Edna heard the father and her sister Margaret talking. She heard the old dog barking and the spurs of the cavalry officer clanged as he walked across the porch. There was the hum of bees, and the musky odor of pinks filled the air. When she returns to Grand Isle, everything is different, and the island is the place for her first awakening. A year later she comes to the ocean again. The water is like a god to direct her to find her potential in every aspect and realize her own achievements while she is learning to swim in it. After she can swim, the only way to destroy her potentials is to drown herself into the water. So Edna stands with all her clothes off in the sun and feels like to be reborn before she rushes into the sea. By doing so, Edna destroys herself on one hand, but gets reborn on the other hand. She can control her life no matter the life she chooses is full of happiness or pains, and she feels she is her own owner, she would not obey others any more and she stands and lives for herself.

3. THE USE OF SYMBOLS

Chopin tells the story in a beautiful conceptive structure. She gives us a vivid picture, which is full of satire and

exploration: The novel opens with Leonce Pontellier sitting on the porch of his seaside summer home in Grand Isle, near New Orleans. He and his wife Edna are renting a cottage from Madame Lebrun. Edna and Madame Lebrun's son Robert join Mr. Pontellier, having spent the afternoon swimming together. Edna and Robert try to relate an amusing experience to Mr. Pontellier, but he is not part of the joke and fails to share their mirth. In the beginning, Chopin hints at the impending division between Mr. and Mrs. Pontellier. Away from his city-based business, Mr. Pontellier is presented as somewhat out of place at the ocean cottage. As this beginning suggests, Mr. and Mrs. Pontellier will become increasingly irrelevant to each other, as Mrs. Pontellier becomes intoxicated by Robert and the sensuous ocean atmosphere, while Mr. Pontellier loses himself in the male sphere of business and social obligations. And we can say that the end is the inevitable result of the beginning. As Mrs. Ratignolle, Miss Reize, Alcee Arobin, they all urge her to awaken. And Miss Reize's music and words, which help to increase the love between Edna and Robert, is the sore of the whole story. Chopin creates a solitary woman not only by her figurative method but also by her relationship with the objective things and specific actions as symbols. Those symbols in the story make Edna's life more solitary.

As we all know symbols play an important role in literature, because literary works reveal both reality and imagination. The story borrows a lot of symbols in its context to deliver the expression and highlight the points what the author really means to present. All those symbols are powerful to show the solitary atmosphere where Edna lives. If we want to have a full appreciation of the novel, it is vital for us to understand the meaning of the symbols occurring in the novel. For the convenience of argumentation, we may classify the symbols in the novel into three categories: natural things as symbols, man-made things as symbols and different actions as symbols.

3.1 Natural Things as Symbols

The major symbol in the story is the birds. Birds usually get high admiring comment among people. Birds can fly up high in the sky, get free from the ground, and enjoy the scenery and life in the world of their own, which is what people expect to do. Birds stand for the power the people desire to have to dominate their life. Just as birds can fly when they want and stay where they are pleased to stay on the earth, the human being desires to follow what they really pursue in their world from the bottom of the heart. To be more specific, the mocking bird and parrot and the pigeon in the novel symbolize women's ability to communicate and the two birds in cages symbolize entrapment of women and the desire to "flight" which acts as a necessary step for Edna's awakening. The ability to spread the wings and fly is a symbolic theme that occurs

often in the novel. Edna escapes her home, her husband, her life, by leaving for the pigeon house to satisfy her will of breaking the family and social cage and flying to her kingdom of freedom, independence and happiness. It is quite obvious that the caged birds are solitary ones. The caged birds have the chance to communicate with others only when their masters hope the birds to entertain them by certain trained skills. Otherwise no masters will pay attention to their pet birds' lonely and dull life within the limited space. The caged birds hope that they may fly into the sky to see the world and have the opportunity to display their natural ability of fling to enrich their life both physically and spiritually. When Edna goes to commit suicide, a broken-wing bird is flying above, and struggles to keep itself in the air, but its disability leads it down to water finally. Birds might be seen as symbols of "distraction". Thus, it is possible that the bird with the broken wing in the suicide scene may symbolize either Edna's mental distraction and consequent inability to sacrifice for her children or her failure to liberate her soul and free herself from convention by continuing to live an awakened life. The latter view may be supported by the symbolism of wings, which are "an expression of rising to the sublime and of striving to transcend the human condition." But again, if "the human condition" is viewed as innately sinful, and pride is the original sin, then the broken wing could represent Edna's failure to transcend her pride by sacrificing herself for her husband and children.

The pigeon, however, may be trained as message deliverers because of their particular nature. So they have the chances to fly in the outside open air and the meanwhile they may enjoy a rather stable life and limited freedom. It is the same solitary Edna who is caged by the social convention. And why she wants to live in the pigeon house can be naturally explained. Edna's solitary life will be enlivened after she obtains certain physical and spiritual freedom. Bees are another symbolic things in the story. When she dies, Edna also hears the "hum of bees" (p.153). This is one symbol that does not seem to fit the negative symbolic pattern. Bees are usually the symbol of the soul, the afterlife, the resurrection, the eloquence, the poetry, and the mind. This implies that Edna's "awakening" is indeed a positive intellectual experience. On the other hand, the hum of the bees may be a cruel irony, for "bees collectively ensure the survival of their species," and Edna, having removed herself from the community, can now no longer survive.

Moon is another important symbol to embody Edna's solitude. In the story, Chopin mentions moon and moonlight many times and "mystic" is the most used word to modify moon. The story has endowed many symbolic meaning to the moon. Firstly, the moon is symbolized to be a mystic power to associate Edna with the Goddess Artemis (Diana). According to the

Greek myth, Artemis is the Queen of night and she sees for herself the childbirth suffering as she helps her mother with delivering her twin brother. Thus, Artemis has hated childbirth and she refuses to go through that experience again. After allowed, she swears to stay virgin. In this sense, Artemis or the moon represents the feminine chastity and virginity. However, this life she lives is totally her personal preference without any control or restrain from others. Meanwhile, the chastity and virginity come with the solitude and no love from men and no children to raise. So the mystic power of the moon is associated with solitude to a high degree. Secondly, the light of the moon delivers the comparison between what Edna thinks and the sexual love and romantic love. Thus the end of Chapter 10 brings the images "strips of moonlight" to imply the strong sexual feeling of "the fist-felt throbbings of desire". The interposed moonlight here tells reads the complex thought Edna has been difficult to be seen through. It could not be said that Edna has no close friends or mates, or she could deal with all the problems in her life on her own. In addition, based on our common understanding, the moon changes its shape in a constant manner from a crescent to a full moon then a new round starts, which is a natural change in the universe and only follows the laws of nature. And similarity happens to Edna too. She feels very solitary sometimes, hopeless or even desperate, and she could not change this situation by herself at that particular time when she can feel that mysterious power. When it comes to the Chinese reread, it is very natural for them to connect the solitude of Change with that of Edna based on Chinese ancient legends. Finally, the moon is nearly the same as solitude in the story to some degree.

The ocean, sea, gulf and the like are also symbolized to show Edna's solitary state. The ocean is a symbol of both freedom and escape. Edna remembers the Kentucky fields of her childhood as an ocean, she learns to swim in the gulf, and she finally escapes into the sea. The ocean also represents self-awareness, an awareness of the vast universe on one hand and her obsessed feeling on the other hand. The surf always acts as a call to communicates with her by sound and make her calm down in the story. As you read, notice how often, even in New Orleans away from the sea, the language mimics the sound of the surf or the actions of the water.

In chapter 4, Robert asks Edna to go swimming together even though she is not a swimmer yet. So she does not want to go for the first thought, but she still goes with him without any reason. Then she begins to realize herself as a human being and know her position in the universe. She does not exactly know her "positon" at first, but she can hear the voice of the sea. From what she feels, the sea is charming, always moving, whispering and calling her to follow her heart. She

completely connects her “solitude” with the solitary atmosphere of the sea when she begins to swim in it. At the end of the story, after Robert leaves, she comes to the Grand Isle once again to indulge herself in the seductive and charming voice of the sea and this the place of her awakening for the first time. This time, she actively communicates with the sea and follows her heart to enjoy forever “the abysses of the solitude” by herself. And as we read, we can notice often even in New Orleans away from the sea, the language mimics the sound of the surf or the actions of the water, a solitary action and solitary sound. These natural symbols suggest Chopin’s intention to combine the heroine with nature in her particular way. We could sense the beauty and the indifference of nature at the same time and also Edna’s solitude by means of these symbols.

3.2 Different Actions as Symbols

Chopin delivers the symbol of empowerment by the way of learning to swim. Edna spends all summer time to learn swimming and she has learned from the men, women, and children on Grand Isle. Edna manages to do both. At last she can swim freely. Mastering the skill of swimming provides Edna with strength, joy, fear and suffering. Also attached to the concept of swimming are the ideas of staying afloat and getting in over one’s head. When she can swim on her own on one night, she feels her strong emotion and love to Robert, and she realizes her marriage without any love is just a tragedy. Meanwhile still on the same night, she begins to have a deep understanding of the significance of death. The way of Edna’s learning to swim also conveys another symbolic meaning, that is, swimming ability can be considered as to a required approach to her final achievements. She may be considered to obtain her achievement to a certain extent at the end of the story even though she swims forever in the sea. However, her achievements could not separate from her solitary sense.

In Chapter 10, when the people attend the Saturday evening party, she goes to swim as he invites her to go. She also feels very excited when she can swim in a simplest way after lots of trials and errors. She is becoming so confidently to swim as far as to somewhere no other women can do. Gradually, she swims out only by herself. When she sets herself apart from others on the sea, she is full of excitement to enjoy the vast water only by herself, which delivers an expression of space and solitude. She is totally intoxicated with this feeling, and we can imagine how solitary she is at that moment. Drawing pictures is a symbol of freedom and one of the ways to brighten Edna’s dim solitary life. It is through the process of drawing pictures that Edna reaches a certain point of her awakening. Edna sees drawing pictures as a way of self-expression and for self-assertion. She learns a lot as a human being when

she concentrates her attention on her drawing. And in this way, her solitary time of duration may be shortened. In a similar way, enjoying music is a symbol of freedom and another important means to animate Edna’s solitary life. There are a lot of descriptions of playing the piano. Both Adele and Miss Reisz play the piano. Each woman functions differently in the narrative of the story. Adele is regarded as a musician by Leonce, but she doesn’t play for art, instead she does so to keep her husband and children cheerful and to add merriment to parties. Miss Reisz, on the other hand, is disliked by all, but is granted status as a musician by only Robert and Edna. The issue of then piano playing echoes the issue of placement in society. If one follows the rules and norms whatever one accomplishes is considered great, if one defies those rules one is shunned and disparaged. Thus the piano playing becomes a symbol of societal rules and regulation. In this story, one of the reasons for Edna to enjoy the playing of Miss Reisz that she can assimilate the power from the music to seek herself. Even if she can get enjoyment from the music, she is still in a solitary mood.

In Chapter 9, one piece of music “solitude” which Edna enjoys is often played by Madam Ratignolle and Edna has no idea of why it is named this way. When she hears the music, she imagines that a man without any clothes on is standing on the seashore with a lonely rock beside, and he seems to be dull and lifeless when he sees the bird flying over him. This imagination and picture in Edna’s mind reflects her personal life and personal solitude. She tries to find her own way to deliver her understanding. She makes a try to doubt and refuses all those traditional practices if they are unfair to women. Everyone is created equal before the natural law. If they have enough ways to express themselves, they will not feel solitary any more. If women obtain enough freedom and equality they will have no ways to experience the solitude. In the story, many traditional symbols like birds, bees, moon, moonlight, sea and the like are employed to express the real meaning, because all those symbols can bring about our imagination and understanding of the scene and implication underlined. Based on our common understanding for all those natural things, we can have a full recognition of meaning the story conveys. Meanwhile, the story is more interestingly readable for more people. The symbols will become a part of the human culture in the eyes’ of the future literature. The symbols in this novel are the outcome of Chopin’s metaphor borrowed to paint and activate the meaning of specific scenes, images and things. All those combinations of different symbols and thought the story perfectly illustrate a complete and active picture and understanding to readers. And in this way, Chopin expresses the protagonist “Edna” fully.

CONCLUSION

According to the above, we can see the sharp-cut and vivid characteristic of persons in the story, is unfolded to us. And they are in deep comparison: Edna and Ratignolle; Robert and Arobin; Old captain and Leonce, etc.. Chopin just used the simple words to describe the heroine Edna's solitary state in her relationship with others around her and with the objects as symbols of her. And because the protagonist lived in New Orleans, there is also a lot French in the novel, which is another unique feature. Chopin gives us a chance to appreciate a song in praise of the fight for women's fate and worthy of a peculiar flower in American literature.

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