

Analysis of the awakening as an antifeminist novel

[Literature](#), [Novel](#)



A woman sits alone in her empty living room, overtaken by an unbearable ennui. She sits cross-legged, with one elbow propped up on the faded, beige armrest, and the other resting on her thigh. She sighs with exasperation as she patiently awaits her children's arrival from school. She understands her role all too well, and mechanically greets her husband, whose demeanor reeks of vanilla and infidelity. He is in high spirits and thus, so is she. He claims that he is overexerted, that it has been a long day. He sleeps rather soundly, his chest rising and falling evenly. She, however, lies awake, and bewails the redundancy of her life. The children are asleep, in separate realms of and unconsciousness, and she turns wearily away from her husband, her mind wrapped in discontent.

This is a fate that, in some ways, a classic of modern literature grappled with. Kate Chopin, the writer of the classic "feminist" novel *The Awakening*, was 49 when she completed the book. To modern day society, the book is critically acclaimed for its strong and diverse standpoints on feminism and self-identity. However, when Chopin released the book in her time, it got disastrous reviews, most of the critics being older men who profoundly disapproved of her writing style, critiquing and trivializing everything that she wished to incorporate in her texts. Those belonging to the mindset of the 18th and 19th century condemned it, calling it "morbid, vulgar, and disagreeable" as well as "trite, and sordid" (Koloski). The self-discovery of women in the Victorian Era proves to be detrimental, and is apparently a guarantee of utmost solitude. In light of the novel's use of symbolism, allegory, and situational irony, Edna's incapability to emancipate herself from the various men who constrict her, and her drastic and mercurial

fluctuations between accepting herself and living for others demonstrate that *The Awakening* does not entirely conform to the feminist ideal. Edna proves that she is unable to move past the patriarchal constraints of society, and thus, the anti-feminist nature of the novel becomes evident.

First and foremost, it can be said that Edna Pontellier is a powerful and vehement protagonist who fights the patriarchy every moment she is allotted. The alarming passiveness of women within the novel is the folly being critiqued by Chopin. She explains subtly that husbands may treat their wives however they please, and that something should be done about this, which explains why the protagonist, Edna, remains so resilient. However, in order for *The Awakening* to completely be called a feminist novel, Edna would have to break free from the constraints of all men, which, of course, she does not do. A feminist is indeed someone who believes in the social, political, and economic equality of the sexes, but a feminist is also a woman who will not allow herself to be pinned down by any man. This “pinning down” refers to entrapment, and the “cage” in which women of the Victorian Era are stuck in, and thus unable to escape from. The first symbol that widely demonstrates this folly is birds. The very first sentence that the book opens with is a squawking sound, coming from the parrot that resides in the cage outside of the Pontellier’s beach house. The parrot can be heard screaming and squawking through the metal bars of the cage at Mr. Pontellier. “A green and yellow parrot, which hung in a cage outside the door, kept repeating over and over: “Allez vous-en! Allez vous-en! Sapristi! That’s all right!” which translates to “go away, go away!” and of course, “he could speak a little Spanish, and also a language which nobody

understood, unless it was the mocking-bird that hung on the other side of the door, whistling his fluty notes out upon the breeze with maddening persistence" (Chopin 1). The parrot represents Edna, and it gives a voice to the seemingly voiceless protagonist, articulating her unspoken feelings. The cage additionally represents Edna's unrhetorical imprisonment. The mockingbird, who is also caged, easily represents Mademoiselle Reisz due to its strange markings and lovely whistling noises. It is evident that the mockingbird is the only thing that is capable of understanding the parrot when it is speaking Spanish. (Near the end of the novel, close to when Edna prepares to commit suicide, Mademoiselle Reisz is the only person alive who is fully capable of understanding Edna.) Chopin tries to use caged birds to allude to the lilliputian role of women during the Victorian Era: society only expects a woman to be of service as either a mother or a wife. Generally, when one thinks of cages and, in specifics, birds in cages, one may believe that such cages are only present for decoration and comfort. It is unwise to think of something so foolish as the bird possibly escaping the cage.

The second symbol that demonstrates this unmalleable folly is Edna's wedding ring. Wedding rings symbolize fidelity and eternalship. To " give a woman a ring signifies never-ending and immortal love" (Noreen). Whether it be to go swimming, or to go to bed, Edna slips her wedding ring off each time she does so. When Leonce came back from work after being absent for an extended amount of time, his commentary and foul attitude during dinner angered Edna profoundly. She fled the dinner hall, and began angrily pacing the room in which she escaped her husband from, and " stopped, taking off her wedding ring, and [flinging] it upon the carpet. When she saw it lying

there, she stamped her heel upon it, striving to crush it. But her small boot heel did not make an indenture, not a mark upon the little glittering circlet.” The wedding ring that Edna tries to destroy symbolizes the tight grasp that husbands have on their wives in terms of marriage. The indestructability of the glittering circlet alludes to the idea that women cannot leave the marriage, no matter the circumstances, for the circle represents eternity and timelessness. This symbol is used to mock the Victorian society and marriages within it because of the passive and unimportant role that women play. Chopin discreetly lets the readers know that marriage is indestructible, and that the bond between husbands and wives is both questionable and irrevocable. As Edna becomes “ increasingly aware that she is “ seeking herself and finding herself,” she struggles with growing ferocity to discard and even destroy the conventions by which she has lived, including her wedding ring”. (Gilbert) Edna’s wedding ring acts as a “ symbol of the bonds between her and Leonce Pontellier, her husband. It represents the vows they agreed to when they got married. By “ taking off her ring and stomping on it to try to destroy it...” (Carey 43) Edna is attempting to liberate herself from her husband and his toxicity, and is finding it impossible to do so. The purpose of this criticism is to evince her “ denial of her role as a mother and wife” (Kaplun). This, even in the rudimentary stages of modern day feminism, transmits a very unambiguous and unequivocal message even to modern-day women, stating in an unapprehensive manner that women are not their marriages; more specifically, they can indeed break free from confinement. However, while Chopin deducts an extremely substantial point, she does not follow through with her convictions.

Upon the realization that she is in love with Robert, Edna begins to explore herself and her sexuality further by pitting herself against the set norms for marriage. Her opposition towards the strict boundaries of marriage serves as the beginning of what could be a feminist criterion, as she feels vestigial flickers of anger and rebellion throughout the novel, but it never progresses. After the discovery of her secret loathing towards her husband, Edna engages in several "dates" with Robert before he flees to Mexico due to an unexpected need to leave the Isles. Heartbroken, she then decides to relieve her sexual urges by becoming involved with the womanizer, Alcee Arobin. She then realizes that he cannot fulfill her velleity, as she is hopelessly in love with Robert and highly fearful of unreciprocation. By predominantly acting this way, Edna asserts that she is still greatly dependent on men in order for her to be happy, and for her life to have true purpose. This tactic is undoubtedly polar to the feminist ordeal, as a feminist is never timorous when stating that she does not require the presence and adoration of a man in order for her to be successful, and find a purpose to her sense of self. Throughout the gradual process of her awakening, the realization of being tethered to her children only enrages Edna further, making her want to distance herself from her children and husband.

Edna Pontellier's mood drastically vacillates throughout the course of the novel. There are instances where she embraces her role as a mother wholeheartedly, then shortly after, curses the fact that she even bore her children to begin with. Edna's fickleness leads readers to believe that she is not entirely emotionally stable. It is evident that Edna subconsciously casts aside her motherly responsibilities and duties because she desires to live a

life for herself, and not others. She neglects her children because by doing so, she fulfills a lifelong yearning to disobey the rules and thus, disregard responsibilities. Edna “[is] not a mother-woman,” (Chopin 8) meaning once her two children, Raoul and Etienne, were out of her field of vision, they were out of her mind, too. She was “ a little unthinking child in those days, just following a misleading impulse without question. On the contrary, during one period of [her] life, religion took a firm hold upon [her]; after [she] was twelve and until-until—why, [she] [supposes], until now, though [she] never thought much about it—just driven along by habit.” (Chopin 54) This signifies that Edna did not think necessarily think about what she was doing or saying - she was just following what her mother, as well as other women of her time were doing. Edna tries to explain that she does not conform to the things women “ should be doing” or the ways women “ should be like”, as she feels as though she was just driven along by habit. The “ misleading impulse” that Edna speaks so ominously of represents the set standard for women, and how the ideology of femininity is embedded into her mind at a ripe age, so she grows up conditioned to believe that she should succumb to her future husband’s wants and needs. Her children’s absences served as a blessing or a relief, even though she did not admit this, even to herself. This ultimately freed her of a duty in which she had blindly assumed, and for which fate had not fitted her. Her “ habitual neglect of the children” (Chopin 24) proves that her constant self-preoccupation made her act childishly herself, and rather selfishly. Her “ drive by habit”, as well as “ habitual neglect of the children” (Chopin 24) proves that her constant self-preoccupation makes her act childishly herself, and rather selfishly. It shows that she is not fit for

motherhood, as she praetermits her children's existence too often to be considered a good mother. Lydia Lovric compares Edna to "women having babies who almost immediately hand the child off to a daycare worker or nanny so that they can return to the office in order to feel fulfilled." (Lovric) This analogy criticizes the protagonist because it highlights her unwillingness and incompetence for being a mother. One should never alternate between loving their children, then immediately after neglecting them. However, she sporadically shows compassion towards her children. It can be observed through close analysis that she does this only in a trance-like state; for she only shows that she cares about them through materialistic means; and not motherly, affectionate ways. She "[is] fond of her children in an uneven, impulsive way" (Chopin 75).

Allegory, through the act of storytelling, can explain the rigid, unmalleable, and pre-set gender roles that Edna's two sons will have to experience, and cannot escape from due to their mother's consistent mental and emotional absence from their lives. Even though she claims she loves them, Edna leads readers to believe otherwise. "She [puts] her arms around me and [feels] my shoulder blades, to see if my wings [are] strong, she [says]. 'The bird that [soars] above the level plain of tradition and prejudice must have strong wings. It is a sad spectacle to see the weaklings bruised, exhausted, fluttering back to earth.' Whither would you soar?" (Chopin 289). To begin with, Chopin denotes Edna as the bird who soars above tradition and prejudice, and explains that in order to do so, Edna must remain resilient and valiant in her efforts. Comparatively, the "weaklings" that Madame Reisz speaks of are a direct reference to Edna's two children. Reisz notably refers

to these children as “ weaklings” because of how they conform to society’s rigid standards. She explains subtly that they will grow up to be exactly like those who have come before them, having underlying implications that they will be “ normal”. Normal, in this instance, is unfavorable, because it alludes to the idea that one must act like a robot, with no real control over his or her life. The “ weaklings” flutter back to earth “ bruised” and “ exhausted” when they realize that assimilating the regulatory Victorian Era society is demoralizing and highly restrictive. Similarly, the “ weaklings” could also symbolize Victorian Era women, as they are subject to carefully structured institutionalized sexism and marginalization. The downfall of her “ weakling” children is inevitable because of Edna’s consistent absence from their lives, as she is incapable of educating them on the aspects of her awakening, which could work in their benefit. Mrs. Pontellier’s mind is always “ quite at rest concerning the present material needs of her children” (Chopin 33), signifying that she is not present emotionally or mentally. She “ sometimes gathers them passionately to her heart; [and] sometimes forget them” (Chopin 76). It is evident that her love only extends to acquisitive means, and is expressed whilst through a dreamy, trance-like state. Attentiveness to “ her children and home is so much the priority that it leaves no room for what Edna sees as a necessity — the inward life, an identity unconnected to matrimony” (Justus). This wholly validates the point that Edna’s “ sporadic expressions of her love for them are proportionate to her growing dissatisfaction as a wife and mother;” and that “ pervasive neglect is compensated for by spurts of concentrated attention” (Justus).

Chopin intentionally creates Edna for vast travels amongst the lands of unconformity. She purposely created Edna so she would inherently disgruntle old, inapprehensive men, and strike an internalized sense of uncomfotability in women of the Victorian Era. Her aims to belittle society worked – and served as an excellent basis, as Chopin was quite fond of the imbroglio men experienced when reading her texts. However, the feminist ordeal is inclusive of everyone, and thus, is not discriminative towards children, men, and others. The consistent relegation of her only two children hastily brushed aside the budding ideas of feminism prevalent in the novel. Consequently, it is evident that Edna does not see her children as fundamental sources of happiness, nor does she take pride in them. Even when she allows herself to be with her children, it is often simulated, with no real context. The awakening of Edna's emotional and sexual desires is exactly what caused her to commit suicide, leaving readers with the impending question of whether the suicide constitutes a cowardly surrender or a liberating triumph. The human folly that is prevalent is the theorization of suicide, and how such intense, drastic measures were taken simply because Edna felt as though her life had not been fulfilling enough. When a feminist is faced with an obstacle or feels over encumbered by her burdens, her perseverance prevails and guides the way. Her ever-present persistence sets a standard in the name of feminism — that the epitome of strength should derive from the movement. Edna committing suicide is equivalent to that of her submitting to the malevolent and demanding hands of society. Situational irony is heavily incorporated in *The Awakening*. The several awakenings that Edna undergoes serves as both a blessing and a curse.

Edna bears the curse of knowledge because she evidently concludes that she will never truly be content with society and its rigid standards. The irony is prevalent because Edna felt rebellious, enraged, and conquered life with a fiery passion. She belittled normalization, and soared high above the regulatory norms. However, due to its ethnic and moral values to her as an individual, where she decided to commit suicide proved to be the most ironic - in the sea.

Moments before her death, Edna sees a "bird with a broken wing was beating the air above, reeling, fluttering, circling disabled down, down to the water" (Chopin 421). Edna is now a woman who is no longer certain of who she is. Her position in life is unsecure, and the limits placed on Edna are as finite as the horizon. The "inevitability of her fate as a male-defined creature brings her to a state of despair, and she frees herself the only way she can, through suicide" (Kaplun). The bird touches base on Edna's failure to find freedom; moreover, her failure to "soar above the plain of tradition." A bird cannot fly with a broken wing. Edna's suicide in the sea is a defiant rejection of Victorian womanhood, and is highly ironic because she dies in the very waters that she discovered herself for the first time. When first learning to swim, she "grew daring and reckless, overestimating her strength. She wanted to swim far out, where no woman had swum before." (Chopin 98) The sea, once a symbol of empowerment and independence, is soon the suicide spot of Edna Pontellier. She grows tired of her normal life, and realizes that Robert cannot satisfy her innermost desires due to the lack of reciprocal love. With that, she steps into the ocean, and begins to swim out afar, claiming that the "touch of the sea is sensuous, enfolding the body in

its soft, close embrace.” (Chopin 403) The bird with a broken wing symbolizes Edna all too well. In the middle of the novel, Mlle. Reisz tells Edna that her wings must be strong in order for her to overcome prejudice and courageously defy the known. Ironically enough, she states that the “weaklings” flutter back to earth, like the falling bird she sees before committing suicide. Although this alludes to her children, Chopin intentionally foreshadows Edna’s death by mentioning the weakling bird, as the quotation has many underlying double-meanings. It is a disheartening spectacle to see the bird, or Edna, realize their true capabilities only too late. The sea in *The Awakening* symbolizes freedom and escape. It is a vast expanse that Edna can brave only when she is solitary and only after she has discovered her own strength. When in the water, Edna is reminded of the depth of the universe and of her own position as a human being within that depth. The sensuous sound of the surf constantly beckons and seduces Edna throughout the novel. Water is associated with cleansing and baptism, which can allude to rebirth, especially within Christianity. The sea is Edna’s awakening – a rebirth. The sea was once a sacrosanct heaven of indefinite potential, but it quickly turns into an empty and enveloping void that serves as both a promise, as well as a threat. In its empyrean vastness, the sea corresponds with the robustness, resplendence, and isolation in aims of mere independence.

While Leonce was away on a trip for work, Edna fell irrevocably in love with Robert Lebrun, a young bachelor who is friends with her and Adele. Whilst spending time together, she realizes that she slowly begins to see him through a different perspective – romantically. Robert too realizes this, and

he decides to flee to Mexico. Edna's heart surprisingly breaks when he leaves, and she then turns to Alcee Arobin, the local flirt and womanizer. They flirt the entire summer, and it is evident that Edna only uses Arobin to fulfill her sexual needs and desires, not because she truly admires or loves him. When Arobin "[leans] forward and [kisses] her, she [clasps] his head, and [holds] his lips to hers," (Chopin 292) Edna expresses that it was the first kiss of her life to which " her nature had really responded." (Chopin 292) Edna is aware of the fact that he is a debauchee man, which accounts for the fact that she does not truly love him. He is simply a doll for Edna to play with, merely an adequate substitute for Robert when it comes to expressing her passions and desires. Instead of committing adultery twice, Edna could have verbalized her unhappiness towards her husband and children, and as a family, they could have solved their disputes gradually, with indefatigable effort. Rather selfishly, she instead chooses to completely shun her husband, and disregard her children. Her acts of fornication can be regarded as a form of sexism and misandry, hereby defying and contrasting all notions of basic and true feminism that advocates equality of the sexes. Edna's disregard for men accounts for her considering men as disposable. Edna claims that " to-day it is Arobin; to-morrow it will be someone else. It makes no difference to me, it doesn't matter about Leonce Pontellier." (Chopin 401) Edna hereby exhibits that men, including Leonce, whom she vowed to spend her life with, are insignificant and meaningless to her. When considering feminism, it is important to remember that intersectional feminism does not coincide with radical feminism, which can be defined as " a perspective within feminism that calls for radical reordering of society in which male supremacy is

eliminated in all social and economic contexts.” (Oxford Dictionary) Edna blames the patriarchy for her inevitable downfall, and according to Christina Williams, she “ never moves beyond the patriarchal constraints of the society depicted in the novel, a vital component to the modern feminist mode of discourse.” (Williams) Edna allows her journey of self-discovery to cross the boundaries of feminism that critics propose the novel supposedly employs. She simply utilizes the men in her life to attain what she wants, whether it be for sexual purposes, to please her family, or anything that evidently benefits her in the long run. The mistreatment of the men in her life is ironic, because her final thoughts before suicide seemingly drift back to the one man she cannot live without - Robert. “ There was no one thing in the world that she desired. There was no human being whom she wanted near her except Robert; and she even realized that the day would come when he, too, and the thought of him would melt out of her existence, leaving her alone.” (Chopin 401) This proves to be one of the most situationally ironic events that occur throughout the entire novel. Edna casts aside all men who she encounters, all except for the one who cannot love her back because of the overly sexist belief that Edna “ belongs” to Leonce. Robert cannot love Edna because he is not willing to commit the act of adultery and break the social code of marriage. Acts of adultery are panegyric, and are thus eulogized when Edna commits it. However, when men like Arobin are sexually flamboyant, he is deemed a “ womanizer”, and is disliked by many. Edna throws Alcee Arobin away when she is finished with him, even claiming that he “ was absolutely nothing to her.” (Chopin 272) When Edna cheats on her husband with 2 other men, she is put on a

pedestal and praised for being “empowering”, and understanding herself sexually. Comparatively, men are ostracized for committing the same offence. Infidelity should be shunned regardless of gender. Marriage is a commitment on both sides, and should not be associated with dominance or submissiveness. It would be hypocritical to claim otherwise. The situational irony accompanied by acts of adultery depict Edna’s mentality and cognitive processes leading up to her suicide. She kills herself in the very waters that she awakens in, and whispers a promise to encumbered and trapped women reading her story in hopes for a better future.

As indicated by Chopin’s discreet usage of symbolism, figuration, and situational irony, Edna is not able to liberate herself from the numerous men that ensnare her with the shackles of domesticity. Her moody changes between being tenderhearted towards her children and then viewing them as diabolical setbacks towards her mission, and her hypocritical acts of adultery prove that *The Awakening* does not entirely conform to the feminist ideal. Symbolism is highly prevalent within *The Awakening*. The sea as well as wedding rings allude to Edna’s entrapment and wish to express herself and not remain silent. The allegory tells the tale of how Edna’s mood is ever-changing, and can determine either her love or abhorrence for her children, as well as other significant people in her life. The situational irony is prevalent because she casts aside the men who she has an affair with, and wishes for the very man who is incapable of fulfilling her deepest desires. Edna “[drowns] herself in water because one can only put out fire with water” (Pollard 144). Regardless of whether or not this novel followed the

feminist ideology, it reached a certain depth that will forever remain in the minds of those who call themselves modern-day feminists.