

The symbolic use of children in the awakening

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



The Awakening, by Kate Chopin, explores the emotional and spiritual consequences of sexism in the early 1900's. During this time, women were legally viewed as the property of their husbands, and were often shamed for things like sexual promiscuity, lack of dependence on a husband, taking up jobs other than homemaker, and failure to dedicate their lives to the lives of their children. While the process of childbirth and childcare is a very necessary thing for the continuation of the human race, it is depicted here in a negative light, as a sign of entrapment, dependence, and conventionality. However, unlike many other issues of sexual discrimination, the natural obligations of childbearing cannot be reversed because they are innate, biological functions, giving this concept an important role in the central conflict of the novel. In *The Awakening*, Chopin uses children to symbolize women's inherent and unavoidable duties, in order to express the depth of their oppression.

All that the protagonist, Edna, desires is to be free of responsibilities that other people so frequently place on her shoulders. She wants to be completely independent and to rely only on herself for the things she needs in life. The motive behind this desire stems partly from the oppression she faces from the members of her community regarding her children, particularly her husband, Leonce. As wife and mother, Edna is expected to base her entire existence around her children. When she fails to do so, her husband shames her, treating her as if motherhood is the only valuable identity for a woman to have. This is clearly due to the social and cultural pressures that were the norm at the time. "For an upper- or middle-class woman to work is a threat to her husband's social status and self-esteem..."

For a woman of Edna's social status to work would imply that her husband is not successful" (Muirhead). These pressures take effect when Leonce claims that Edna has exhibited "habitual neglect of the children" (Chopin 5), after she does not keep a close enough watch on her ill son. Directly after this altercation, Edna feels as though there was a weight placed on her; the weight of unfair societal expectations for her priorities. Having her identity defined as the type of mother that she is makes her feel worthless to everyone besides her two children. This same child-centered perspective is shared by Edna's close friend, Adele. However, as Edna's foil character, Adele embraces the responsibility and never questions it. "The role of women prescribed by the dominant patriarchal ideology is defined in relation only to marriage and to motherhood. It is embodied in Adele Ratignolle, whom Chopin terms the 'perfect mother-woman'" (Gray). Adele's lack of feminist willpower and desire for independence causes Edna to pity her, "... a pity for that colorless existence which never uplifted its possessor beyond the region of blind contentment..." (56), and further pushes her in the direction of self-liberation. Edna gradually withdraws from her past life and forms a new one, synonymous to a rebirth. She buys her own house, begins painting, explores her sexuality, all to redefine herself as a human rather than an object of Leonce's possession, or simply a mother. During this period of time, however, she is unable to distance herself from her children, nor break the emotional ties that she has to them. While Edna seems indifferent to every other aspect of her life (besides Robert), she becomes emotional when she is away from her children, "[I]t was a wrench and a pang that Edna left her children" (96). This reinforces the idea that, in the Victorian era, no

matter how much independence a woman gains from her husband, her job, her friends, she still cannot escape the responsibility of child-care. Edna's conflict in choosing between living for herself or living for her children shapes the plot throughout the rest of the novel.

The most defining moment of the novel occurs at the climax, where Edna witnesses Adele in labor. This event arguably traumatizes Edna, leading her into a deep depression. "Edna has protected herself... by cultivating an emotional and mental privacy which allowed her to contemplate the unattainable. But the sheer, inescapable reality of childbirth breaks into that space and roots her entirely to the here and now. A physical relationship has at last invaded her thoughts" (Simon). The scene, as well as the reference to Adele's hair as a "golden serpent" (109), paints a picture of women's most basic, primal nature, alluding to the story of Adam and Eve. In this story, Eve is punished by condemnation to painful childbirth for all women to come for eternity. "To the woman He said, 'I will greatly multiply your pain in childbirth, In pain you will bring forth children; Yet your desire will be for your husband, And he will rule over you'" (New American Standard Bible. Genesis 3: 16). Viewing God as the highest, most powerful being, painful childbirth is essentially unavoidable, particularly during the Victorian era with lack of modern medicine. Edna describes the process as "torture," and is painfully reminded of her own childbirth, which was seemingly not worth the torment, "...and an awakening to find a little new life to which she had given being, added to the great unnumbered multitude of souls that come and go" (110). She begins to realize that in rejecting childbirth and child-care, or in her opinion, oppression, she is also rejecting her own nature and biological

womanly purpose. She begins to feel sick as she discovers the truth of her situation: that she cannot abandon her children and live on her own, which means that she will never achieve complete independence. “ Having built her entire existence around her desire for something transcendent, when her new connection with her children—forged at Adele’s birthing scene—penetrates and dissolves her illusory spiritual world, rather than continue without it, Edna rejects life itself” (Simon). Adele exacerbates Edna’s guilt by saying “ think of the children, Edna. Oh think of the children!” (111), in reference to Edna’s neglect of her children as a consequence of her independence and isolation from her previous life of oppression. Adele’s words ring in Edna’s mind, and she is forced to finally face her conflict of children versus self, ending in her suicide.

By the end of the novel, Edna makes a decision regarding her conflict. This results in her ultimate suicide as a means of escape from societal pressures that she cannot overcome. “ Edna’s final despair derives from a paradoxical fear of entrapment (with her children as the primary source of entrapment) and a fear that she will be left alone, without authentic intimacy” (Ryan). Earlier in a conversation between Edna and Adele, Edna says, “ I would give up the unessential; I would give my money, I would give my life for my children; but I wouldn’t give myself” (47). This makes the reason for Edna’s suicide fairly clear: she cannot escape her responsibilities as a mother and therefore could never live truly for herself. Since abandoning her children was looked down upon, doing so would have ruined her two sons’ future reputations. While Edna did not want to care for her children any longer, she still loved them and would sacrifice her life for theirs. The alternative would

be to accept her motherly responsibility and attempt to live in oppression as something she is not. Just as Edna told Adele, she the would sooner die than give up herself, or her sense of identity and new life. “ Ultimately... Edna Pontellier ends her life because she cannot have it both ways: given her time, place, and notion of self, she cannot be a mother and have a self at the same time” (Simon). Therefore, she staged her death to resolve her struggle and to complete her symbolic rebirth as a free woman, “ she felt like some new-born creature, opening its eyes in a familiar world that it had never known” (115).

Throughout *The Awakening*, children are seen as the subject of women’s oppressions and entrapment, symbolizing their intrinsic obligations as mothers. As the protagonist, Edna, redefines her life in almost every aspect, she breaks through each of society’s walls of oppression one-by-one, beginning with her husband and ending in marriage. Her ultimate failure to overcome the expectation of childbirth and childcare is indicative that this is not a societal expectation, but a natural one. Since she can not humanly redefine woman’s nature, she decides that she can no longer be human, ending in her suicide. “ Edna chooses suicide rather than a life confined by societal expectations” (Streater). This tragic story conveys the reality of life for many women in the Victorian era who were the victims of sexual prejudice and oppression.