

Awakening to Open a Pandora's Box: Individuality and Feminist Transition in Kate Chopin's *The Awakening*

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ABSTRACT

This paper explores the psychological development of the protagonist in Kate Chopin's (1850 – 1904) novella, *The Awakening* (1899), examining how her awakenings are influenced by societal ideology, individuality, geography, and music. Set on Grand Isle, a symbolic and physical space of temporary freedom, Edna Pontellier's experiences challenge the traditional gender ideology of the late 19th century. Through close textual analysis, this study scrutinizes how the environment of the resort, artistic and interpersonal influences (including the sea, music, and interactions with other characters) catalyze her escalating awareness of the disparity between societal norms and individuality. Her awakenings not only mark a transformation from conformity to self-expression but also intensify her isolation, leading to her tragic end. Published at the turn of the century, *The Awakening* reflects tensions of the nineteenth-century feminist ideology, which advocated women's participation in public and political life while still negotiating conventional domestic ideals. Through Edna's pursuit of individuality beyond her roles as wife and mother, Chopin engages with nineteenth-century feminist debates while exposing the psychological costs of a social norm that leaves little to no room for female individuality. By foreshadowing the feminist transformations at the turn of the century and revealing the arduous process of challenging entrenched gender norms, Chopin is perceived as a forerunner of later feminist thought.

KEYWORDS

American regionalist literature, nineteenth-century American literature, nineteenth-century feminism, feminist criticism, gender roles

1 Introduction

Nineteenth-century feminist discourse arose as a challenge to the barriers hindering women's fulfillment (Gray, 2004, p.53). The prevailing ideology of the era confined women to roles within marriage and motherhood, where they were expected to serve as maternity and sexuality, and have limited opportunities for individuality (Gray). This ideology is illustrated in Kate Chopin's (1850 – 1904) *The Awakening*, first published in 1899. The protagonist, Edna Pontellier, struggles with societal expectations placed upon her while she yearns for freedom and self-expression. Her journey to autonomy is influenced by the setting of this novella – Grand Isle, Louisiana, plays a crucial role in her awakenings. The geography and characteristics of Grand Isle are not just a backdrop but integral to the plot, also situating the story within the American regionalist literature. As Rowe (1983, p.867) notes, American regionalist literature "implies a recognition from the colonial period to the present of differences among specific

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areas of the country". Moreover, it refers to an intellectual movement that fostered regional consciousness, beginning in the 1930s (Rowe). The significance of Grand Isle for Edna can be attributed to "the influence of late-nineteenth-century fashionable resorts" (Parmiter, 2006, p.1). According to Parmiter's (2006) explanation, Chopin's depiction of Grand Isle represents a type of summer retreat where middle-class white women, like Edna, could temporarily escape the constraints of their domestic responsibilities. These resorts offer a space where the typical gender norms are relaxed and allow greater physical and emotional independence (Parmiter). The environment is pivotal in Edna's psychological development because it provides her with the freedom to recognize her gender role and assert her individuality, foreshadowing her eventual awakening. However, this newfound independence deepens her sense of isolation and realization of societal expectations, contributing to the decision to end her life. With such, Grand Isle is not only a physical setting but a catalyst for Edna's inner transformation and ultimate demise.

As suggested by Peter Ramos, there are several interpretations of Edna's suicide, whether it is a triumph and achievement of her independence, a "fatal, inescapable result" of women's autonomy (Ramos, 2010, p.145), or Chopin's fulfillment of the public's moral expectations for a woman who committed such transgressions (Toth, 1991, p.120-121). Regardless of the interpretation, Edna's ultimate suicide could be attributed to her escalating awakenings throughout the story, which are both physical and psychological. Unlike the protagonist in another American regionalism short story, "Rip Van Winkle", who falls into a long sleep for 20 years and awakens after the American Revolution, Edna's awakenings in *The Awakening* are more immediate yet influential. During the initial moments of her awakening, she becomes aware of the discrepancy between her external persona and internal self. For example, after her first small awakening in Ch.4, Chopin depicts her as not a "mother-woman", highlighting her misalignment with society's expectations. With her growing realization of her life in society, she strives to align her emotions and thoughts with her outer self, aiming to achieve her assertion – "I give myself where I choose" (Chopin, 2008, p.113). Her changes from mother to herself, along with the noteworthy publication year in 1899 – at the turn of a century – situate the novella at the transition between nineteenth-century feminist doctrine and the social changes that would become more predominant in the twentieth century. While nineteenth-century feminists accepted women's domestic roles as "natural," the concept of the individual had also "emerged to rival it" (DuBois, 1975, p.64-5). They increasingly advocated that these domestic roles should not exclude women from citizenship and other social and political participation (DuBois, p.65-6). By the twentieth century, with more women engaging in the public sphere of work and politics, these ideals transformed into reality. Ellen DuBois (p.70) argues that the achievements of nineteenth-century suffragists laid the groundwork for this transformation by identifying the changing dynamics of "the family and the new possibilities for women's emancipation." Chopin's portrayal of Edna reflects this historical transition. Edna not only desires autonomy but also seeks an identity independent of her prescribed roles as wife and mother. In this regard, her desire extends beyond the contemporary feminist demands of women's participation in the public sphere to challenge the domestic identity that defined respectable womanhood. *The Awakening*, thus, engages with nineteenth-century feminist debates while exposing the psychological costs of a social norm that leaves little to no room for female individuality. Through close reading, this paper is going to examine the psychological development and relationship between Edna's awakenings and her ultimate suicide. This paper argues that the awakenings Edna experienced throughout the narrative reveal her growing realization of the realities regarding gender roles and individuality.

These awakenings reflect a transformation in her inner emotions and thoughts, which begin to influence her outward actions. As Edna gradually becomes increasingly conscious of the unchangeable societal norms, her senses of entanglement and despair cumulate, ultimately escalating into her suicide as a means of relief. The analysis will begin by exploring key moments of Edna's awakenings, examining their effects and consequences on her inner emotions and physical behaviors. This will provide insight into her escalating awakening in her motherhood and individuality. Next, it will scrutinize Edna's transformation from a conventional woman into an individual more concerned about her inner emotions and thoughts. The discussion will conclude with an evaluation of the overall impact of these changes on her character.

2 Awakening: Gender Roles

Edna's first awakening begins after a literal sleep, awakening to realize her constrained role as a wife as well as a mother under societal norms. When Edna's husband, Mr. Pontellier, returns to the cottage from Klein's hotel, his arrival awakens her. As he undresses, he talks to her, sharing anecdotes, news, and gossip he gathered during the day. Edna initially responds only with "little half utterances", which leaves Mr. Pontellier feeling discouraged (Chopin, 2008, p.9). This situation also suggests the disconnection between Edna and her husband. Mr. Pontellier returns from Klein's hotel and is eager to share news and gossip with Edna, emphasizing that he views their relationship as central to his life. To fulfill the societal expectation of a supportive and obedient spouse, Edna is expected to be engaged and responsive. However, Mr. Pontellier fails to consider Edna's perspective; she is already in bed and asleep after a long day spent with Robert and the two children. She is too exhausted to engage in conversation. This lack of mutual understanding implies the growing emotional distance between them. Despite viewing his wife as "the sole object" of his life and placing her in a central role, Mr. Pontellier still feels disheartened, or perhaps even angry, when Edna shows little interest in engaging with him. This sense of disappointment, or anger, fuels his subsequent accusation towards Edna concerning their child Raoul's fever. Unlike in the previous narrative, Edna responds and reacts differently to Mr. Pontellier's accusation. He has treated her similarly on earlier occasions, for example, in Chapter 1. Mr. Pontellier's comments – such as exclaiming, "What folly! to bathe at such an hour in such heat!" and criticizing her sunburn, saying she is "burnt beyond recognition" (Chopin, 2008, p. 6-7) – reveal his tendency to judge and reprimand rather than engage with Edna on an emotional level. It is also worth noting that the initial reference to Edna is presented from Mr. Pontellier's point of view, as he views her "as one looks at a valuable piece of personal property which has suffered some damage" (Chopin). After examining Edna's appearance, Mr. Pontellier comments that she is "burnt beyond recognition" (Chopin). Gray (2004, p.59) explains that sunburned skin signifies a lack of leisure, which Mr. Pontellier finds highly objectionable. According to the prevailing societal norms, his wife "must be an object of his conspicuous consumption, and therefore, a creature of leisure rather than activity" (Gray). Gray argues that Mr. Pontellier's comment reinforces Edna's role as his wife and as a "mother-woman". This societal expectation is immediately imposed on Edna, and she begins to internalize it. In response to Mr. Pontellier's dismissive remarks, which focus on superficial concerns of his leisure, Edna does not dispute them and remains silent. This reaction reveals that she is accustomed to his behavior and attitude and has learned to navigate his moods without expecting much emotional support. Instead, Edna "held up her hands, strong, shapely hands, and surveyed them critically, drawing

up her fawn sleeves above the wrists" (Chopin, p.7). The action of examining her hands in response to Mr. Pontellier's accusation reflects her awareness of his disapproval, as noted by Gray (60). Looking at her hands reminded Edna of her rings, "which she had given to her husband before leaving for the beach" (Chopin, p.7). Upon receiving the rings from Mr. Pontellier, she slips them onto her fingers and promptly resumes her wifely duties. Despite Mr. Pontellier's earlier accusatory criticisms, Edna reminds him to "take the umbrella" and asks if he is "[c]oming back for dinner" (Chopin); thus, fulfilling her role as a dutiful wife concerned with his well-being and the household. This portrayal characterizes Edna as a compliant wife who, rather than arguing with her husband, quickly resumes her domestic duties in order to ensure his satisfaction.

However, Edna responds very differently to Mr. Pontellier accusation later the same night, foreshowing a change in her character. She speaks up for herself, asserting her perspective and refuting his claims. When Mr. Pontellier challenges her role as a responsible mother by continuously accusing her of "inattention" and "habitual neglect of the children" (Chopin, p.10), Edna does not remain silent. In spite of her fatigue, she attempts to explain the actual situation and defend herself, revealing her determination. She asserts that Raoul "had no fever" and "had gone to bed perfectly well" (Chopin). Under the weight of Mr. Pontellier's "monotonous, insistent" accusations, Edna goes to check on her son (Chopin). She returns without saying a word, and as her husband falls asleep, she begins to cry. The narrator describes her emotional breakdown as she sits in a wicker chair on the porch:

The tears came so fast to Mrs. Pontellier's eyes that the damp sleeve of her peignoir no longer served to dry them. She was holding the back of her chair with one hand; her loose sleeve had slipped almost to the shoulder of her uplifted arm. Turning, she thrust her face, steaming and wet, into the bend of her arm, and she went on crying there, not caring any longer to dry her face, her eyes, her arms. (Chopin, 2008, 10-11)

Although she is familiar with Mr. Pontellier's behavior and attitude as shown in Chapter 1, her emotions finally explode. The narrator reveals that this emotional outburst is unusual in her married life, continuing to state that this is an "indescribable oppression, which seemed to generate in some unfamiliar part of her consciousness, filled her whole being with a vague anguish" (Chopin, p.11). Such an uncommon feeling is sparked by her mental awakening, which is linked to her physical waking up. Edna's initial, literal waking up is triggered by her husband's return, eager to share his day with her. Soon, she becomes fully awake when Mr. Pontellier accuses her of neglecting their child's fever. Regardless of physical or mental waking up, this night marks the first of many awakenings for Edna.

This small initial awakening, tied to her family life, symbolizes the start of Edna's realization of her gender role. The effect of this awakening to gender roles is evident in both physical and mental aspects. Edna's awakening not only impacts her emotions, leading to a sleepless night, but also directly influences her perception of her gender role and its impact on her role as a mother. As Edna cries and merely takes a rest throughout the night, she might reflect on her role as a mother and wife. According to Schweitzer (1990, p.168), as Edna listens more attentively to her inner voice and contrasts it with her external reality, she realizes that her world offers her only two extremes. She can either opt for resigning to "herself to her 'fate' as a woman", which also includes the role of a mother, or "she can demand her practical and existential freedom as an individual, a freedom to explore the range of her desires conventionally reserved for men" (Schweitzer). Through her determined efforts to rebut Mr. Pontellier's accusations, Edna demonstrates her commitment to fulfilling her responsibilities as

a mother. Similarly, her interactions with Mr. Pontellier in Chapter 1, stated in the previous paragraph, suggest she tries to conform to the role of a tamed wife. Despite her efforts, Mr. Pontellier continues to express disappointment and place pressure on her. The narrator even unveils that Mr. Pontellier is dissatisfied with Edna's duty towards their children, claiming that she is not "a mother-woman", which is the female norm on Grand Isle (Chopin, 2008, p.12). Confronted with the societal expectations that clash with her true personality, Edna chooses to reject her traditional role as a woman during this awakening. Her resignation from motherhood is evident in her absence from caring for the children. When Mr. Pontellier returns to the city for business, Edna has a visit from Madame Adèle Ratignolle, forms a "congenial group" on the porch with Robert and Ratignolle (Chopin, p.14), and goes swimming with Robert. This pattern highlights her noticeable absence from spending time with her children. One morning, Madame Adèle Ratignolle and Edna go to the beach together. Edna persuades Ratignolle to "leave the children behind" for a walk on the beach. However, Ratignolle's concerns are limited to home and family; she is not interested in art or other pursuits outside these confines (Gray, 2004, p.57). Even at the beach, she is reluctant to put away "a diminutive roll of needlework", pleading for it to be "allowed to slip into the depths of her pocket" (Chopin, p.18). The narrative portrays Madame Ratignolle as the epitome of the mother-woman on Grand Isle. Gray (p.57) claims that a "leisurely stroll beyond her duties as a wife and mother is not permissible". No matter her interests or even her relaxation, she is deeply intertwined with her family and her maternal role (Gray). In contrast, Edna's leisure and relaxation are disconnected from her family, creating a clear divide between her and the typical mother-woman like Madame Ratignolle. Edna's attempt to persuade Ratignolle to leave her family duties for leisure further emphasizes her misunderstanding of the mother-woman role. It is clear that Edna's interests and concerns prevent her from fulfilling the role of a mother-woman in a way her husband would appreciate. With the awakening she experiences that night, she realizes Mr. Pontellier's dissatisfaction with her performance as a mother-woman, despite her efforts, prompting her to abandon this role.

3 Awakenings: Individuality

Edna's initial awakening serves as the bottom line of her psychological development, leading her towards an awakening of her individuality. Her realization that she does not conform to traditional gender roles is a failure to her. Psychologist Carol Gilligan's (1982) findings on moral development in the nature of gender suggest that these traditional gender roles restrict women from developing autonomous identities. This is evident in Edna's case, as she gradually relinquishes her role as a mother, she shifts focus to self-development. She attempts to break through the societal conventions and get rid of a life she feels has failed her. Edna's subsequent awakenings occur during her time at the beach with Madame Ratignolle in Chapter 7 and at Mademoiselle Reisz's place as she listens to piano music in Chapter 9. These interactions play a significant role in her awakening to individuality, enabling her to recognize her own needs and the gap between her inner thoughts and the life imposed on her by societal expectations.

The physical touch and the sea are of the utmost importance concerning Edna's awakening when she is at the beach with Ratignolle. Both Edna and Ratignolle, having left their children behind, go to the beach and sit under the shade. As Edna gazes out at the sea,

Ratignolle questions her about what or whom she is thinking about. Initially hesitant to express her thoughts, Edna responds, "Let me see. I was really not conscious of thinking of anything," as she tries to retrace her thoughts (Chopin, 2008, p.20). Captivated by the endless view of the water, sails, and blue sky, Edna recalls a childhood memory in a "meadow that seemed as big as the ocean" (Chopin). Here, the connection between the vast ocean and the meadow suggests a sense of freedom. Immersed in her memories and surroundings, Edna begins to articulate her feelings. She reveals that this summer, she feels as if she is once again walking through the meadow "idly, aimlessly, unthinking and unguided" (Chopin, p.21). Through this expression, Edna discloses her preoccupation with her inner thoughts, which she can feel and express. Then, she revisits numerous memories, including her relationships with her siblings, parents, school friends, a young man she once had an affection for, and her current partner, Mr. Pontellier. She comes to the realization that her marriage to Mr. Pontellier is "purely an accident" and that her earlier fantasy of a mutual "sympathy of thoughts and tastes between them" is impossible (Chopin, p.22). Confronted with her disillusioned marriage, she is determined to permanently close the door to the realm of romance and dreams. What is more, she acknowledges that her love and care for her children are inconsistent – sometimes marked by enthusiasm, other times by neglect. Although she does not share all of these reflections and memories with Ratignolle, the mere act of reflecting on these memories and recognizing her own voice fills her with a sense of liberation and intoxication. Both Ratignolle's non-verbal communication and Edna's immersion in the environment facilitate Edna's awakening to her inner voice. Haptics, which refers to non-verbal communication involving "physical touch", can convey "liking and intimacy" (Wood, 2000, p.96-7). Initially, when Madame Ratignolle places her hand over Edna's, Edna feels awkward and confused, as she is not used to such physical contact. However, she soon embraces Ratignolle's "gentle caress" (Chopin, p.21). By the end, Edna even rests her head on Ratignolle's shoulder, reflecting a growing sense of closeness and comfort. These evolving haptics underscore Edna's growing ease in her environment and her emerging willingness to express herself.

The sea, which deepens her immersion in the environment, serves as the catalyst for Edna's awakening to her inner thoughts. As Edna gazes at the sea, she shares her thoughts and reflections, an action influenced by her previous experiences with Robert in the water at Grand Isle. After their visit to the beach, the narrator reveals that Edna begins to understand her place as a human being within the universe, recognizing the distinction between the world and herself. The narrator describes the sea as having a "seductive" voice that speaks to the soul, while its touch is sensuous, softly embracing the body (Chopin, p.18). The voice of the sea persuades Edna to explore and express her inner voice, while its sensual touch offers her a sense of freedom and relaxation. This depiction is, thus, evident that Edna has formed a connection with the sea, and it has already begun to influence her deeply. Beyond the contextual evidence, sea bathing and swimming were historically widely regarded as therapeutic practices during the 18th and 19th centuries (Parmiter, 2006, p.7). Summer resorts like Grand Isle were famously known as retreats where people could escape summer diseases or recover from illnesses (Parmiter, p.2). Believing in the curative powers of the water, vacationers flocked to these places "to drink from mineral springs or bathe in the ocean waves" (Parmiter). This historical backdrop further emphasizes the transformative and healing influence the sea has on Edna. Rather than healing Edna's physical health, the sea affects her mentally, contributing to her growing sense of self and her gradual awakening. Parmiter claims that the sea allows Edna to realize her dissatisfaction with her family life – an emotional and intellectual issue which is far more challenging to address. Therefore, the haptics of both

Ratignolle and the sea create a comfortable and relaxing environment that encourages Edna to reflect on and express her feelings, contributing to her awakening.

This following awakening, similarly, enables Edna to reconnect with herself, this time through music, which serves as a therapeutic medium for expressing emotions. The music triggers an intense flood of feelings within Edna, deepening her emotional response and her sense of individuality. Edna experiences this awakening at Madame Lebrun's home on a Saturday night, a few weeks after she visits the beach with Ratignolle. The house is filled with families and friends, creating a festive atmosphere with various entertainment, including music, recitations, and dancing. At one point, Robert invites Mademoiselle Reisz to play for Edna. The belief that music has healing effects has a long history. In ancient Greece, Apollo, the god of music, was considered the god of medicine. Hippocrates, known as the "father of medicine", took his mental patients to the temple and listened to music around 400 B.C. (Antrim, 1944, p.409). According to Beavers (1969, p.89), music therapists aim to use music to help patients gain a deeper understanding of themselves and their surroundings, leading to "a more satisfactory adjustment to society". Similarly, the music played by Reisz in the novella has similar effects, contributing to emotional responses and self-realization. Although Edna has always been fond of music and listens to Madame Ratignolle's play and practice, her response to Reisz's performance is very different from her usual reactions and from those of her peers who are also listening to Reisz at the same time. When Edna listens to the piece "Solitude" played by Ratignolle, her mind usually conjures up vivid images, such as the vision of a naked "man standing beside a desolate rock on the seashore" (Chopin, 2008, p.30). Ratignolle's other pieces evoke scenes such as "a dainty young woman clad[s] in an Empire gown", her children at play, or an image of an empty earth (Chopin). In contrast, Mademoiselle Reisz's renditions allow Edna to truly feel her emotions rather than merely conjuring images. Upon first hearing Reisz's music, "a keen tremor" runs "down Mrs. Pontellier's spinal column" (Chopin). She waits for these usual "material pictures" to appear, but there are "no pictures of solitude, of hope, of longing, or of despair" (Chopin). Instead, the narrator reveals that "the very passions themselves were aroused within her soul" (Chopin). The sway and lash of the waves seem to beat against her, causing her to tremble, choke with emotion, and be blinded by tears. Through this contrast, Kate Chopin emphasizes the difference between structure—represented by images that engage specific ideas—and substance, which is conveyed through the raw emotions that resonate deeply within Edna (Camastra, 2008, p.161). Reisz's music allows Edna to feel her inner emotions directly, rather than merely imagining them, highlighting the importance of truly understanding and connecting with one's own feelings. Camastra (p.160) asserts that while the "emotional fluidity of music" plays a significant role in Edna's psychological development, it is not the only factor contributing to her awakening. Edna's individual agency, reflected in her actions and thoughts, demonstrates her active engagement with the music rather than passive influence (Camastra). By experiencing a revelation that challenges both her sensory perceptions and the traditional feminine standards imposed on her, Edna faces a dichotomy that "creates an irreconcilable schism" (Camastra). Initially, she attempts to adhere to these prescribed feminine norms, but this awakening disrupts her conformity. She becomes aware of the conflict between her evolving sense of individuality and the societal expectations placed upon her, leading to her awakening by both the influence of music and her reflections.

Edna's recognition of self and the social structures that confine her becomes central to her awakening, extending beyond mere emotional outbreak and leading to her rejection of societal norms. Early on, after realizing the constraints of gender roles, the narrator reveals that

Edna instinctively understands the duality of life – the outward existence that conforms and the inward life that questions. Her moments at the beach with Ratignolle and the emotional impact of Reisz's music serve as catalysts, providing a platform for her to deeply reflect, express, and vent her innermost thoughts and emotions. The awakening of Edna's individuality has effects on her perceptions of gender, family, and upper-class society. Her transformed gender perception is visible in her interactions with Robert and her experiences with swimming. Early in the novella, in Chapters 5 and 6, Robert invites Edna to go for a bath. At first, she declines but later agrees due to a sudden impulse. Her hesitation might stem from the prescribed moral norms of the time. This is discussed in Felicia Holt's (1890, p.6) "Promiscuous Bathing", which cautions against the perceived dangers of mixed-gender swimming. Holt highlights the perceived danger, arguing that swimming with men posed a significant risk to "a girl's purity and perfect unconsciousness". Concerned by the "daily spectacle the bathing beach now presents," Holt expresses worry over the close physical contact between swimmers who "crowd and jostle" together in the sea. She even urges her readers to protect "our daughters" from "freely exposing those charms which should always be concealed from the curious and vulgar" (Holt). This plea reflects 19th-century society's anxiety over maintaining strict moral codes, particularly among men and women. After her awakenings, the narrator reveals that Edna pursues swimming lessons from Robert nearly every day, driven by a strong desire to master swimming during the whole summer. Disregarding the traditional boundaries of intimacy, Edna even needs Robert's hand nearby for reassurance, symbolizing her growing courage and willingness to challenge societal norms. Edna's invitation to Robert to visit Cheniere, a nearby island, in Chapter 12, along with their flirtatious discussions about future plans, such as "We'll go wherever you like" (Chopin, 2008, p.39) and finding hidden treasures, further underscores her growing willingness to break from societal conventions. Edna's increasing closeness to Robert is also seen as a betrayal of her family, as she yearns to develop a romantic relationship with him.

Apart from her relationship with Robert, Edna's lack of attention to her children in Chapter 14, her disregard for the social expectations of upper-class society in Chapter 17, and her avoidance of family responsibilities in Chapter 18 further illustrate the impacts of her awakenings regarding family and upper-class society. Though Edna shows care for her children by coddling and soothing her youngest son, Etienne, to sleep, her role as a responsible mother is doubtful. Instead of spending time with her children, she dedicates the entire day to Robert, leaving her kids in the care of Madame Ratignolle. In Chapter 17, upon returning to New Orleans, Edna rejects the social expectations of upper-class society. She has consistently followed the tradition of hosting "Mrs. Pontellier's reception day" every Tuesday since her marriage six years ago (Chopin, 2008, p.54). Traditionally, she would wear a reception gown and spend the afternoon serving her visitors. However, after her time at Grand Isle, Edna no longer feels bound by these conventions and chooses to be out during the day, neglecting her duties of giving and receiving social calls. Such a disregard marks her shift from a conventional woman to an individual who resists societal norms. In Chapter 18, a contrast emerges between Edna and Ratignolle. Edna's actions indicate a growing focus on her own desires rather than her family. She declines Mr. Pontellier's invitation "to look at some new fixtures for the library" at home and spends hours "looking over some of her old sketches" during the day (Chopin, p.58). In contrast, Ratignolle is depicted engaging in housework, such as "assorting the clothes which had returned that morning from the laundry", fulfilling her role as a wife (Chopin, p.59). These differing behaviors highlight Edna's increasing resistance to traditional family norms. Influenced by her newfound self-awareness in awakenings, Edna begins to challenge and defy

conventional norms related to gender, family, and class. This shift highlights Edna's individuality and marks it as the game changer in her character.

4 Awakenings Escalating into Suicide

Edna's awakenings not only offer her a path out of her traditional and unfulfilling existence, but they also reveal the harsh realities of her situation, ultimately contributing to her tragic end. While Camastra (2008, p.160) suggests that Edna's demise is not the result of an "impetuous harmony", it can be attributed to the gradual development of her relationship with Robert, the impact of music, and her experiences with swimming. Edna's struggle to break free from societal conventions and her intense longing for Robert are evident in her bold assertion, "I give myself where I choose" (Chopin, 2008, p.113). However, their final declaration of love in Chapter 36 underscores the insurmountable obstacles they face. Robert ultimately decides to leave, acknowledging that their future together is unrealistic because Edna is bound by societal constraints as a wife and Robert, as the eldest brother, has to uphold his responsibilities and be a mature and responsible brother. For Edna, who sees Robert as her everything, his decision to abandon her plunges her into despair, exacerbating her sense of hopelessness in life.

The devastating impact of Edna's situation is also intertwined with music and swimming. The music piece "Solitude" not only foreshadows Edna's eventual isolation but also "alludes to Kate Chopin's translation of a story by the same name written by Guy de Maupassant" (Camastra, 2008, p.162). "Solitude" has an immediate influence on the novel, whereas its impact is comparatively less immediate in *The Awakening* (Chopin, 2008, p.162). Music, intended to provide communion and healing, highlights the complexities and ambivalence of Edna's life. Camastra (p.157) suggests that rather than solely fostering Edna's "epiphany", music serves as one of the catalysts for her self-destruction due to its "plaintive strains on the piano". While swimming plays a crucial role in facilitating Edna's awakening and reflects her growing independence, it also foreshadows her eventual suicide, as her experiences in the water become one of the catalysts for her tragic end. Initially, she is like a baby learning to walk, but after her awakening, she suddenly becomes able to swim "alone, boldly and with over-confidence" (Chopin, p.32). Edna's success in learning to swim symbolizes her newfound individuality and awakening, yet it also foresees her solitary and tragic fate. Considering the situation of mixed-gender swimming in the 19th century, Stilgoe (1991, p.347-8) suggests that Edna's swimming symbolizes social experimentation which ultimately "ends in disgrace and disaster, in suicide. Stilgoe's interpretation aligns with Holt's (1890) fears about women learning to swim, illustrating the potential consequences of challenging societal norms. Indeed, like music, swimming at summer resorts is often seen as having a healing effect. In the final chapter, Edna might initially seek to relieve her emotions through swimming because "summer place is supposed to renew one for life back in the city" (Parmiter, 2006, p.2). Swimming in the sea does offer her a sense of freedom, allowing her to move her body freely while feeling a deep connection to nature as she swims naked, and the sea embraces her. Though Edna acknowledges the fear of swimming too far and being unable to return, she surrenders to the sea, immersing herself in the water and her childhood memories of the meadow. As she reflects on her life, the overwhelming sense of exhaustion ultimately takes over, leading her to a tragic end.

5 Conclusion

Edna's awakenings in both gender roles and individuality enable her to recognize the disparity between her true self and societal norms. In her initial awakening, triggered by Mr. Pontellier's return, Edna realizes that despite her constant efforts to please her husband and fulfill traditional gender expectations, she receives no positive affirmation as a mother or wife. This realization marks her transformation from a compliant wife to one who expresses herself and challenges these roles. Her awakening in gender roles impacts her both physically and mentally, as she suffers from insomnia and emotional breakdowns. Aware of the gap between her and societal expectations, Edna ultimately abandons her role as a "mother-woman." The subsequent awakenings of her individuality are influenced by her interactions with Madame Ratignolle and Mademoiselle Reisz. The physical closeness and the soothing effects of the sea provide Edna with a sense of intimacy and immersion, making her feel embraced and allowing her to express and reflect on her inner self with Ratignolle. Meanwhile, Reisz's music also catalyzes Edna's awakening, enabling her to feel her emotions rather than just imagine them. The impact of these awakenings is evident in Edna's perceptions of gender, family, and upper-class society. She becomes increasingly focused on her own desires, as seen in her growing intimacy with Robert, her lack of attention to her children and family, and her disregard for the social duties – the reception day. These changes reflect Edna's deepening rejection of societal norms in favor of her emerging sense of self. These awakenings prompt Edna to challenge societal conventions in her pursuit of a more fulfilling life and urge her to focus on her emotions and thoughts, hence, marking her newfound individuality. However, they also contribute to her eventual downfall. The connections Edna establishes with Robert, music, and the sea throughout the narrative gradually lead to her tragic end. Robert's rejection, the melancholy notes on the piano, and Edna's solitary swimming all foreshadow and culminate in her final isolation and loneliness.

Rather than merely portraying Edna as a victim of nineteenth-century gender norms, the novella traces her psychological trajectory to reflect contemporary feminist tensions. Through her successive awakenings and struggles, Edna realizes the disparity between the prescribed gender roles and the desire for individuality. Although her suicide may appear to render her pursuit of individuality a tragedy, it can also be seen as a depiction of abandoning the "old" self confined by traditional gender norms. As a forerunner of later feminist thought, Chopin not only foreshadows the feminist transformations of the early twentieth century, which is evident in the 1920 ratification of the 19th Amendment, but she also underscores how arduous the process would be in the coming century, as reflected in Edna's experience.

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