

# The Awakening of Edna Pontellier in Kate Chopin's "The Awakening"

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The Awakening of Edna Pontellier's Character in Kate Chopin's Work *The Awakening*

Diploma Paper

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## **1. Introduction**

*The Awakening* is a novel written by Kate Chopin, and it was published in 1899. It was created at the end of the nineteenth century, and that is an important fact for understanding this work, because it was the time of social tension and changes. The setting is New Orleans and the Southern Louisiana coast. The whole story is about a female protagonist Edna Pontellier, a twenty-eight-year old woman, and her awakening, which can be interpreted as a struggle for self-awareness, self-possession, liberation from social conventions, and yearning for freedom of expression, own will, and love. Through this diploma paper Edna's development from a woman who lived her life in some kind of a semi-conscious state to a woman who became totally aware of herself, her needs, and wishes will be presented. Edna was trapped in a marriage without love, and in a social environment in which she felt like an alien, because she, a Kentucky Protestant, was surrounded with Creole Roman Catholics who had different views of life, love, and freedom than she. She awakes from her semi-conscious state of devoted wife and mother to a state of total awareness, in which she discovers her own identity, and does everything to satisfy her emotional and sexual desires. Through a series of little awakenings Edna becomes a strong, independent woman, who moves out of her family house, leaves her husband and children, and is responsible only to her own needs. She breaks the social conventions, and lives the life she wants to live. Eventually, that all leads to her isolation from others, because people do not accept rebels, and that isolation gradually developed into loneliness, and after a few disappointments that loneliness led to some kind of depression, and finally it all ended with Edna's suicide. Her awakening was in a way a road to solitude and death, because only through death could her defiant soul free herself from social norms, and reach the infinite freedom, but all that will be more elaborately discussed throughout this diploma paper.

## 2. The Context of *The Awakening*

Although *The Awakening* is not a political novel, it is important to understand the political and social context in which it appeared. Kate Chopin wrote about the actual lives of women in her time, and in this novel Edna Pontellier's life represents an example of the usual woman's position in the late nineteenth society. Actually the whole novel is based on the experiences which provoked the awakening of that female protagonist's imagination and sexual desire. Also, the tradition of female submission and male domination that defined the most late nineteenth century marriages is being discussed. As it has been already said in the introduction, the 1890s in America were time of social tension. Urbanization and industrialization were beginning to change the traditional ways of living and thinking. Furthermore, "the traditional ways of thinking about human origin and destiny were threatened by Darwinism and the higher criticism of the Bible" (Culley 117). The society began to change, and the view of women's rights and their duties began to change too. Upper-class women were attending colleges, entering professions that previously were barred to them. Lower-class women were protesting against their bad working conditions. Women of every class were trying to better their position in the society that was mostly ruled by the men. Although it is concerned with the rights of woman to freedom, self-expression, self-awareness, and it also deals with the women's oppressed position in society which is provoked by the authority of men, it is important to say that this is not a feminist work, because "Kate Chopin was never a feminist or a suffragist; in fact, she was suspicious of any ideology. She was committed to personal freedom and defied social convention in a number of ways, including smoking cigarettes and walking out alone" (Culley 117). Most women in New Orleans, which is the setting of this novel, had their roles already prescribed by the society. Women had "their place" in the family and life. Their main role was the role of the angel of the house. They were subservient to men financially, physically, and intellectually. They were treated as if they were incapable of thinking for themselves. The husband had the total authority over his wife:

All of a wife's 'accumulations' after marriage were the property of her husband, including money she might earn and the clothes she wore. The husband was the legal guardian of the children and until 1888 was granted custody of the children in the event of a divorce. The wife was 'bound to live with her husband, and follow him wherever he (chose) to reside.' A wife could not sign any legal contract (with the exception of her will) without the consent of

her husband, nor could she institute a lawsuit, appear in court, hold public office, or make a donation to a living person. (Culley 118)

It was expected from them to be housewives, wives, mothers and only that. Nothing else, and nothing more. Men had the authority, and they were the active members of the family, while women represented the passivity. The public sphere belonged to men. They had the right to vote, to go to colleges, to work, to get better working places, and higher wages. On the contrary, women did not have the right to vote. They were barred from most professions, colleges, and were always in the shadow of men. It was thought that women were naturally suited only to maternity and domestic roles, which meant that they should bear children, take care of them, cook, clean, and sit at home, as if they were incapable of doing anything else. A married woman's legal identity was subsumed into her husband's, which means that husband legally represented his wife. She did not have her own identity, because it was taken from her, and she should accept that way of life without struggle, because those were the social conventions. Women should be self-sacrificing beings, who did not have life out of the borders of their family house. They were practically condemned to a life that they would spend polishing the kitchen floor, cooking, and taking care of children. They were deprived of their own identity and basic human rights. Some women could live like that, but some of them could not, because they could not accept to live like prisoners of their own home.

Edna was one of these women who in a way lost herself in her marriage with a Creole, Leonce Pontellier. She was a beautiful woman, who was unhappy with her position in that marriage and society. Social conventions were ordering her to be a mother, housewife, wife, to be passionless and chaste, but Edna is an expressive woman who has her desires, her own will, and she has the courage to break the social roles appointed to her by society, and to find her own identity independent of her husband and children. In her marriage she was treated like a possession, as it can be seen from the behaviour of Edna's husband Leonce: "'You are burnt beyond recognition,' he added looking at his wife as one looks at a valuable piece of personal property which has suffered some damage" (Chopin 4). Edna was unhappy and she felt like a bird in a cage. She needed to free herself. Besides her roles as a mother, wife, and housewife, she needed to be a woman too. Her husband should have helped Edna in her development, and he should help her realize herself in all those three areas, but he did not show any interest to partake in her awakening. Her desires, wishes were quite unimportant to him, and he acted as a typical man of that time. If his behaviour towards Edna was not so indifferent, maybe Edna's awakening would not have such a tragic end.

### 3. Style

Kate Chopin's narrative style in her novel *The Awakening* can be categorized as naturalism, because "*The Awakening* neatly exemplifies the 'naturalist' plot of individual decline with its concern for the pressures of environment and circumstance, and its focus on forces (both inner and outer) beyond the control of the characters" (Hochman 212). Through the character of Edna Pontellier Chopin writes about the problems of her time. On the example of Edna's life Chopin presents the experiences of everyday life, and shows the consequences of social norms that can be even tragic, which an individual can feel on his skin. Furthermore, "the naturalist often describes his characters as though they are conditioned and controlled by environment, heredity, instinct or chance" (Pizer 10), and Kate Chopin has perfectly shown that on the example of Edna's character throughout this novel. She was living a life that was governed by the society and its norms. She was just a marionette in this play named life, which strings were moved by the society. Edna was not given the opportunity to do or to be what she wants, because she had to play the roles which the society has given to her. Besides that, she was living in the surrounding of Creoles, and she was a Kentucky Protestant who had different views of life than Creoles, so that it was obvious that she was living a life in which she could not be herself. Through series of awakenings Edna begins to evolve psychically and emotionally, and throughout this novel Chopin describes that way to self-awareness which will have a tragic ending, because Edna was not understood by her environment, society, and her beloved ones. Except being a prisoner of society, she was also a prisoner of her own passion, and desires, because everything she did, she did it because she was led with her needs, and inner conflicts. In other words, she was not able to control her desires and wanted to do everything in order to satisfy her own wishes because that was something beyond her power. "The naturalist populates his novel primarily from the lower middle class or the lower class" (Pizer 11), but Edna did not belong to lower classes. Despite the fact that "she was well educated and sophisticated," her greater access to culture, however, "did not give her either a sense of autonomy or a sense of community" (Hochman 213). As it was already said, Edna did not possess a sense of community, she was in a way a "solitary soul" (Hochman 213), so she decided to break all those social norms, and live the life she wanted. Her awakening was the beginning of her individual decline, because she isolated herself, and that isolation grew into solitude, which led to Edna's tragic end. Also, one of Chopin's most important stylistic techniques is that the narrator is detached from the story. Neither does the narrator feel compassion for the protagonist's life, destiny, or experiences, nor does

she/he criticize protagonist's actions. Furthermore, the narrator does not offer any kind of opinion on the protagonist's behaviour. It is on the reader to decide whether he or she will criticize, support, or feel compassion with the protagonist.

#### **4. Edna Pontellier as a Rebellious, Romantic Soul**

Edna Pontellier was a twenty-eight-year old woman who was married to Leonce Pontellier, a forty-year-old wealthy New Orleans businessman. Surrounded with Creols Edna, a Kentucky Protestant, was always feeling like a stranger, because she was different from them. She was not accustomed to their ways of speaking, and their behaviour, so she could never totally fit into such society. She could never show her true self, and because of that she was living a life half-awake suppressing her thoughts and needs. Edna was always a dreamer, a romantic soul, and "even as a child she had lived her own small life within herself" (Chopin 35). She learned to save her thoughts for herself, and she never tried to turn those thoughts and wishes into actions, because the society did not accept the idea that a woman should be more than just a mother and wife. Every woman had her prescribed role which she had to play without any complaints, and Edna "had all her life long been accustomed to harbour thoughts and emotions which never voiced herself. They had never taken the form of struggles. They belonged to her and were her own, and she entertained the conviction that she had a right to them and that they concerned no one but herself" (Chopin 121). We have an expressive, intelligent woman who was an idealist, and was never given an opportunity to turn her dreams into reality. Edna's idealism "lends to her a virginal and innocent quality" (Franklin 515). Although she has experienced sexual initiation through maternity and marriage, she has psychically extended her girlhood into the third decade of her life. Even in her third decade she stayed a little girl in her soul who was never sexually awake. She was not even self-aware during her life, especially during those seven years of marriage, because she had spent those years in a semi-conscious state passing through her life half-dreaming and losing herself. Edna is presented to us as a woman who does not have adult past, and the most vivid memory that she possess is the one of walking as a little girl through the high meadow grass of Kentucky:

I was just walking diagonally across a big field. My sun bonnet obstructed the view. I could see only the stretch of green before me, and I felt as if I must walk on forever, without coming to the end of it. I don't remember whether I was frightened or pleased. I must have been entertained. (Chopin 42)



That memory is a total contrast to her life, and probably she is remembering that free walk, because her life was not free. She felt as if she was trapped, and she needed to walk again without any obstacles and duties that were now placed upon her.

Her early erotic fantasies tell us even more about "her habit of longing for the unattainable and her later refusal to learn from these experiences" (Franklin 516). She was enamoured with a cavalry officer at a very young age, in love with a man visiting a neighbouring plantation when she was a teenager, and infatuated with a tragedian as a young woman, but her marriage with Leonce Pontellier was not ruled by such emotions. That marriage was "purely an accident, in this respect resembling many other marriages which masquerade as the decrees of Fate" (Chopin 46). Leonce "pleased her" and "his absolute devotion flattered her" (Chopin 46), but the main reason for marrying him was "the violent opposition of her father and sister Margaret to her marriage with a Catholic" (Chopin 47). We can see that Edna was a rebellious soul, and that that marriage was just one rebellion out of many of which her life consisted. Besides that, she thought that with a marriage that was without passion, and with a man who worshipped her, she will enter the world of reality, and close the door of the world that was full of her romantic fantasies. One thing that she did not think of is that she would lose herself by marrying for such reasons, because she could not close the door of her own romantic soul which is made out of dreams and romance. By entering that marriage she was entering a semi-conscious state where she was never totally aware of herself. Eventually she completely lost herself, and got used to living like that. As the time was passing by, she grew fond of her husband, and was glad that her marriage is passionless "realizing with some unaccountable satisfaction that no trace of passion or excessive and fictitious warmth coloured her affection, thereby threatening its dissolution" (Chopin 47). Edna was also fond of her children, but in an uneven way, because she would "sometimes gather them passionately to her heart; she would sometimes forgot them" (Chopin 47). She was not like the Creole women who lived only for their family, and blindly obeyed their husbands. She was different from them, and did not see the love for her children and husband as the main objective of her life. Edna could not sacrifice herself for them, because she did not see the marriage and family as the total fulfilment of her life. Although she was trying to suppress her character, needs, and desires, it was just a matter of time when the awakening of her real self will happen.

Trapped in an unhappy marriage, she often denied that unhappiness, which can be noticed almost at the beginning of the novel, when Leonce was again carping at her habitual neglect of the children:

The tears came so fast to Mrs Pontellier's eyes that the damp sleeve of her *peignoir* no longer served to dry them. 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. She could not have told why she was crying. Such experiences as the foregoing were not uncommon in her married life. They seemed never before to have weighed much against the abundance of her husband's kindness and a uniform devotion which had come to be tacit and self-understood. (Chopin 14)

As it can be seen from this passage she was not happy in marriage, but she tried to convince herself that the kindness of her husband is stronger, and more important than his behaviour which makes her cry. She felt oppressed, dissatisfied with her marriage, but moreover with her own life. Her community, husband, and even children were suffocating her, and she needed to free herself from them, to regain self-possession, and to liberate her own self. The summer at Grand Isle and experiences she had there will initiate the awakening of Edna's real self, and her sexuality.

## **5. Creole Women and Edna**

Edna's awakening begins slowly, and from the very beginning it is expected to end as a disappointment, although she is hoping that it will bring her fulfilment. The tragic end could be foreseen, because she was living in time in which women like her, who possessed their own will and were temperamental, could not succeed in their attempts to realize their own plans. Even if they tried, no one would understand them, and sooner or later the society would lead to their psychological destruction which usually resulted with a tragic end. She is sharply contrasted with the other New Orleans mother-women, so that the qualities of Creole women are emphasized, and Edna was definitely not one of the mother-women who prevailed that summer at Grand Isle:

It was easy to know them, fluttering about with extended, protecting wings when any harm, real or imaginary, threatened their precious brood. They were women who idolized their

children, worshiped their husbands, and esteemed it a holy privilege to efface themselves as individuals and grow wings as ministering angels. (Chopin 19)

One of those Creole women was Edna's friend Adele Ratignolle who was "the embodiment of every womanly grace and charm" (Chopin 19). With her "flaming and apparent beauty" she was like "a heroine of romance and the fair lady of our dreams" (Chopin 19). She has a spun-gold hair, blue eyes like sapphires, and lips like cherries. The fact that she is growing a little stout does not detract from her grace and pose. Even when she visits Edna she takes her sewing with her so that they can make winter clothes for their children, and Edna, although she "could not see the use of anticipating and making winter night garments the subject of her summer meditations" (Chopin 21), did not want to appear uninterested, so she cuts a pattern for her children's garments. Mrs Pontellier was not like the Creole women who worshipped their husbands and children, and whose main objective of life was to get married. Unlike Creole women who as wives were without superiors, loving and true, Edna could not devote herself exclusively to her husband and children. She even liked when they were absent and she was let alone.

While the Creole women possessed "more feminine and matronly figure" (Chopin 37), Edna was "rather handsome than beautiful" (Chopin 9). Even her physical appearance made her different: The lines of her body were long, clean and symmetrical; it was a body which occasionally fell into splendid poses; there was no suggestion of the trim, stereotyped fashion-plate about it. A casual and indiscriminating observer, in passing, might not cast a second glance upon the figure. But with more feeling and discernment he would have recognized the noble beauty of its modelling, and the graceful severity of pose and movement, which made Edna Pontellier different from the crowd. (Chopin 37)

Mrs Pontellier was never so long surrounded with Creoles. She was not used to them, their ways of speaking, and acting towards one another, but somehow her friendship with Adele furthers the shedding of her outer layers of reserve, because she started to share her feelings, thoughts, and childhood memories with Adele. Furthermore, Edna was at the same time impressed and shocked by the Creole's entire absence of prudery, so that "their freedom of expression was at first incomprehensible to her, though she had no difficulty in reconciling it with a lofty chastity which in the Creole women seems to be inborn and unmistakable" (Chopin 23). She was getting used to such

ways of speaking, but she could not keep the mounting colour back from her cheeks when Adele freely spoke about her pregnancy and other things. Edna was always self-contained and "not accustomed to an outward and spoken expression of affection either in herself or in others" (Chopin 43). Being surrounded with such different people who possessed more freedom of speech and behaved more freely than she, a yearning awoke in her for such freedom of expression and behaviour. It moved her to allow herself more freedom, to participate in such conversations, to spend time with those people, and that all, subconsciously, initiated the beginning of her awakening, which was intensified through her friendship with Robert Lebrun, and experiences she had had with him.

## **6. The Awakening of Edna Pontellier's Self and Sexuality**

Every summer for eleven years Robert Lebrun has been the "devoted attendant of some fair dame or damsel" (Chopin 25) at Grand Isle, but in society where jealousy and adultery are almost unthinkable because of the inborn chastity of the Creole women, his flirtations were never taken seriously, and this summer Robert "initially assumes towards Edna his usual role as chivalric lover" (Franklin 514). The community succeeded in keeping his passion under the control for so many years, and he never thought anything serious with his flirtations, but Edna evokes in him a part of his nature that has been suppressed, so he follows his feelings and initiates the moonlight swim, which provoked Edna's awakening to self-awareness. He also suggests the excursion to Cheniere Caminada, which was an intensification of Edna's first awakening, and the beginning of her sexual awakening. Robert was always with Edna. He accompanied her everywhere, spoke with her, gave her attention, and he did everything her husband did not do. Edna's husband Mr Leonce Pontellier, also a Creole, was always busy, interested only in business, and he took Edna for granted. He was never there for her, and did not understand her needs, desires, wishes. He did not even know her real character, because when she was awakening to herself, Leonce thought that she is becoming someone else. Although he lived seven years with her, he did not know his wife, because he was never at home. Actually, Leonce did not care about Edna's development, because she was for him just another piece of valuable furniture. He treated her as his possession, and that is the main reason why he did not react to her changes, and to her emotional stirrings. Leonce is a typical man of that time who thought that woman's place is at home, where she should cook, clean, take care of the household, raise up children, and his role is a role of a businessman who brings money to the house, and a role of a devoted father who comes and plays with his children, brings them gifts, and spoils

them. He considered it to be naturally for the woman to be self-sacrificing, and give up everything for the family. Neither did he partake in Edna's self-awakening, nor did he partake in her sexual awakening. He did not show any interest for the changes she was going through. He was only interested in money, business, and public appearances for which Edna was responsible. She was a receptionist of important guests, and had to be the perfect housewife, entertain them, so that her man could succeed in his business. Robert was the complete opposite of Leonce, and Edna began to project all her unattainable lovers from her youth upon him. He was in a way her unattainable lover, someone whom she should not have, and could not have. Robert serves as a reflector of her erotic drives. He had a "clean-shaved face" and there was "no shadow of care upon his open countenance." "His eyes gathered in and reflected the light and languor of the summer day" (Chopin 8). He is described as a young man who talks "a good deal about himself" (Chopin 9) as does Edna. "Both of them are in a narcissistic stage of development; neither has suffered nor lived without the security of his culture" (Franklin 515), and Edna sees in Robert a vision of a man who actually does not exist. She projected her imaginary perfect man upon him, so that the man she saw in Robert was actually a man that was in her, a man of her dreams and imagination. Edna does not know Robert as an individual. She knows only what she wants to know, and it is clear that that kind of love could not succeed, because she did not love him for who he was, but for whom she imagined him to be, and that would be more apparent later when they meet after his return from Mexico. Edna started to compare feelings and passions which she felt for her unattainable lovers from her youth with her marriage, and with her feelings toward Leonce. She realized that her marriage was empty without any stronger feelings. Although she was earlier happy because there was no passion in her relationship with husband, she was now, when her emotions were stirred, and her awakening subconsciously began, dissatisfied with their marriage. She was awakening to her real self, and becoming that romantic, passionate woman again who was aware of everything that was surrounding her, "in short, Mrs Pontellier was beginning to realize her position in the universe as a human being, and to recognize her relations as an individual to the world within and about her " (Chopin 33). She was awakening from her semi-conscious state to the state of self-awareness, but of course such experience was confusing her, and was even shocking to her, because "the beginning of things, of a world especially, is necessarily vague, tangled, chaotic, and exceedingly disturbing" (Chopin 34). This awakening was Edna's beginning. It was the beginning of her world in which her real self is living, and it is expected to be disturbing, and chaotic, because it was like an awakening

from a dream that lasted for seven years. It is not strange for the person who was sleeping for seven years to be shocked after waking up and facing the reality. Edna was not completely conscious about her awakening. She felt that something is happening to her, and that she is beginning to feel different, but until her experience of first time swimming alone she was not totally aware of the awakening that began to happen within her soul, mind, and body.

On Saturday, the twenty-eight of August, which was the night of her first swim, Edna was first captivated by the music of Mademoiselle Reisz. As she listened to Reisz's piano playing "the very passions themselves were aroused within Edna's soul, swaying it, lashing it, as the waves daily beat upon her splendid body. She trembled, she was choking, and the tears blinded her" (Chopin 66). In such moment of vulnerability Robert initiated the swim under the full moon, and Edna for the first time in her life had swum alone. She tried to swim many times, but she failed because she was too afraid. Now, on the Saturday night, the twenty-eight of August, "the swimming seems to come without effort, exactly as music has just now affected her for the first time" (Chopin 66). That night Edna was like "the little tottering, stumbling, clutching child, who of a sudden realizes its powers, and walks for the first time alone, boldly and with over-confidence" (Chopin 70). That night was her awakening to life. It was her rebirth. She began to be herself. Edna swam for the first time alone, without any help. She depended totally on her own strength, and "a feeling of exultation overtook her, as if some power of significant import had been her to control the working of her body and soul" (Chopin 70). For the first time she was the one who controlled her moves, life, and for the first time she was totally independent. She became aware of her abilities, strength, and felt overconfident and wanted to swim out "where no woman had swum before" (Chopin 71). No one was holding her, and telling her what to do. In her life she was treated like a child who was incapable of thinking for itself, or doing anything alone. Always under the control of her husband, and limited by the social conventions, Edna did not have the chance to show, and develop her real self. After swimming alone she realized her strength and need for freedom. She wanted to have the right to her happiness, her dreams, and not to be suppressed by her husband who only cared about wealth, social position, public opinion, and not about his wife's problems and feelings. Edna wanted to reach out for the unlimited and loose herself in it. That is the reaction she gets while swimming, because the sea was without any limitations, it was free, wild, and seductive to her. The sea represented never-ending freedom, and strength, something that could not be tamed. She wanted to loose herself in that unlimited freedom, because her whole life was lived according to the prescriptions that others have

made for her. While she was swimming she turned and looked toward the shore, and the stretch of water behind her looked like a barrier which she alone would not be able to overcome. "A quick vision of death smote her soul" (Chopin 72) but somehow she gathered her strength and swam back to the shore. Those scenes are like a prediction of her future tragic end which will happen at the same place where she experienced her first awakening. The night of her first swim is the night of liberation of her real character and of thousand emotions, half of them which she did not comprehend. It was the awakening of her own will, and need for independence. That night she refused to obey her husband, and could not realize why she obeyed him before, because he was never that what she wanted. Edna was waking up from her seven years long dream. She was becoming herself, and after a long time she was becoming aware of the reality, which can be seen in the following lines: "Edna began to feel like one who awakens gradually out of a dream, a delicious, grotesque, impossible dream, to feel again the realities pressing into her soul" (Chopin 81).

The intensification of Edna's self-awakening and the beginning of her erotic awakening happened on the excursion to Cheniere Caminada. On the boat trip to the island, Robert proposes Edna a trip to Grand Terre to "climb up the hill to the old fort and look at the little wriggling gold snakes, and watch the lizards sun themselves" (Chopin 88). That provoked in Edna erotic fantasies, because "she would like to be alone there with Robert, in the sun, listening to the oceans roar and watching the slimy lizards writhe in and out among the ruins of the old fort" (Chopin 88). She wanted to be alone with Robert, to spend her time only with him, to get more close to him without anyone to interrupt them. Edna probably thought that such an excursion with him would give them both the opportunity to know each other better, and she could be free to show him her feelings, because they would be totally alone, and no one would bother them. During the church service on the island Edna is overcome by feeling of oppression and drowsiness that causes her to flee, because she started to free herself from everyone and everything, and was in a state when she could not stand any type of authority, earthly or spiritual. So she fled from the church service because she was feeling that her freedom was being limited. When Edna leaves the island church, Robert takes her to a cottage at the far end of the village. "The whole place was immaculately clean, and the big, four-posted bed, snow-white, invited one to repose. Edna took off her shoes and stockings and stretched herself in the very centre of the high, white bed" (Chopin 93). Edna admires her body, and indulges herself narcissistically. "She ran her fingers through her loosened hair for a while. She looked at her round arms as she held them straight up and rubbed them one after the other, observing closely, as if

it were something she saw for the first time, the fine, firm quality and texture of her flesh" (Chopin 93). She was becoming aware of her body and sexuality. Also, "a long dreamless sleep in the snow-white four poster bed of Madame Antoine is another mark of her initiation into the erotic" (Franklin 518). The drinking of the wine, and eating of the brown bread like an animal "tearing it with her strong, white teeth" (Chopin 95) show that she is hungry and yearning to satisfy the needs of her body, which also include her sexual desires. When she finds Robert, she asks him: "How many years have I slept? The whole island seems changed. A new race of beings must have sprung up, leaving only you and me as past relics. How many ages ago did Madame Antoine and Tonie die? And when did our people from Grand Isle disappear from the earth?" (Chopin 96) This part of the novel resembles a fairy tale, where Edna is the Sleeping Beauty who wakes up, and finds only her prince and no one else. These are Edna's secret thoughts, because she wishes that Robert and she are the only ones out of their race who are alive. If it were so, they could be together, love each other, and there would be no obstacles to their relationship. If the people from Grand Isle disappeared from the earth, there would be no one to judge them; the social norms would not exist anymore and they would be free to do what they want. They would be the only people and they would live, and care for each other. Here we can see that Edna is a romantic who lives for her dreams, and by telling her that she slept for hundred years and that he was the one who guarded her slumbers, Robert participated in her imaginary fairy tale. They shared the magic of those moments, but when Edna came back to Grand Isle she was abruptly confronted by signs of passing time and change, and her whole world shattered when she found out that Robert, who realized that his feelings for Edna were forbidden and socially unacceptable, was leaving Grand Isle and going to Mexico.

After Robert's leave Edna felt her youthful feelings again, and "recognized anew the symptoms of infatuation" (Chopin 116) which she felt toward her unattainable lovers when she was a child, teenager, and a young woman. She misses him, because she was used to having him around, and spending time with him. She thought that someday they would have their own fairy tale, and keep sharing magic moments. When Robert suddenly decided to leave, her world changed. She was obsessed with him. She sought him in everyone and everything. Edna felt empty and alone, because "Robert's going had some way taken the brightness, the colour, the meaning out of everything. Her whole existence was dulled, like a faded garment which seems to be no longer worth wearing" (Chopin 117, 118). When he left, he took happiness out of Edna's life, and left her even more dissatisfied with her monotonous life. She felt as if she had lost what she had held, and now she was



condemned to live in the present which was only hers, to torture her by forcing her to live without Robert. But "the strongest chords of Edna's awakening to self are sounded right after Robert leaves" (Franklin 519). She had told Adele: "I would give my life for my children; but I would not give myself. I can't make it more clear; it's only something which I am beginning to comprehend, which is revealing itself to me" (Chopin 122). She would give everything material for her children, and her physical self, her life, but she would not give her psychical self. She would not give up her character, needs, interests, her right to freedom and happiness for them. She was not a mother-woman from the very beginning, and now she admitted that to herself and others. Although it sounds selfish and cruel to hear such things mother saying about her children, because it is believed that maternity and children are the most important things in woman's life, it is also cruel toward a woman to force her to give up everything when she has children. She has to give up her dreams, and totally lose herself in order to be a good, self-sacrificing mother. She has to let go of her career, and give up everything she wanted to achieve or experience, because she has to be always there for her family, and to be ready if that same family for which she sacrificed everything did not appreciate her effort and did not respect her. Edna realized that she wanted to develop herself, enjoy her independence, and she had every right to do so, but she often exaggerated in her fight for more freedom, and did many things which she probably would not do if she had someone who understood her. She was like an animal that was kept in a cage for a long time. When that animal finally gets its freedom, it does not know how to use it, because it is shocked by the world, people, and reality. Walking around alone without anyone to guide it, the animal would probably have strong reactions concerning the world it just entered, and maybe it would hurt someone, or do some damage even if it was not in its nature to do such things, but if it had someone to help it enter that free world, it would have accepted the new state more easily. If Edna had had someone who would understand her, and walk with her through the process of her awakening, she probably would have acted differently, and her life would not have a tragic end, but she did not have anyone, so she continued to run in many wrong directions, and do things which did harm to people around her, especially to her children.

On Edna's return to New Orleans, her confrontation with conventional society begins more clearly, as it is demonstrated in her abandonment of reception days, and her family house. Her infatuation with Robert continued. She spent her days dreaming about the day when they would meet again, and she was searching for news about him. Edna also began to take more critical stance

on her sketching, which was the symbol of her growth. Her sexual and self-awakening are happening simultaneously, and she had problems with the differentiation of her awakenings, which provoked the difficulties in her thoughts and wishes. On the one hand, she wanted to be totally independent, and her idol was Mademoiselle Reisz, a musician, who dedicated her whole life only to music. People did not like her, and she did not like them. She did not care for anything; only the music was important to her. She did not have a husband, children, or family. She only had music. Mademoiselle Reisz "wore the shabby lace and the artificial bunch of violets on the side of her head" (Chopin 161) which were the symbol of her "damaged femininity" (Franklin 521). She is independent, alone, and that alienates her from that society in which maternity plays a great role, but from which she could not escape. She was a magnificent pianist, totally free and Edna wanted to have such freedom. Mademoiselle Reisz was different from the rest of the community. She did not see the marriage as the main objective of her life, but music. She never gave up her dream, and did not change her character for anyone, but to live like that you have to be a strong person. When Edna says that she wants to be an artist, Reisz tells her: "The artist must possess the courageous soul. The brave soul. The soul that dares and defies" (Chopin 165). If someone wants to follow their dream, they have to be strong, prepared for many obstacles, and ready to break social norms, ready to be different and be proud because of that. That sentence can be applied to Edna's life, because if she wants to succeed, to make her dreams come true she must expect that everyone will try to sabotage her work, and make it more difficult. She had to be ready for success and for failure too. She had to learn never to give up, but Edna was not a courageous soul, because at the end she was too lost and weak to continue her fight, and she killed herself. As we could see Edna wanted to be totally independent, but on the other hand, she was always yearning for Robert. She wanted his love and a relationship with him. She wanted that they belong to each other, but that would restrict her freedom, because every relationship brings obligations and duties toward each other. While she sees Ratignolle's "domestic harmony" as "appalling and hopeless ennui," and pities Adele for her "colourless existence" (Chopin 145), she is not aware that what she rejects in them is something for what she craves to have with Robert.

Edna's indulgences are not only absurd but dangerous. Her mood varies, and "there were days she was very happy without knowing why. She was happy to be alive and breathing, when her whole being seemed to be one with the sunlight, the colour, the odours, the luxuriant warmth of some perfect Southern day" (Chopin 149). In such days she was positive and thought that everything

would be fine, but there were days "when she was unhappy, she did not know why, -when it did not seem worthwhile to be glad or sorry, to be alive or dead; when life appeared to her like a grotesque pandemonium and humanity like worms struggling blindly toward inevitable annihilation" (Chopin 150). Those were days when she could not do anything, when she wanted to be dead. Those were the days which were destroying her psychically and physically. She was falling in some kind of a depression, because the man for whom she awakened had left her, and now she was totally awake and still trapped in her life. She needed to start again, to create her life in this state when she was self-aware, so she left her family house and went to live in another smaller house, where she would not be surrounded with her husband's possessions, moreover, she would not feel like a possession anymore. Nothing was keeping her to stay in her family house, because she did not love her husband, and she could not be so hypocritical and stay with him. The children were not a good enough reason for her staying, and living a life that she does not want to live. Her husband did not even ask her why she was moving out. He was concerned with the thought what the people would say. Leonce was not interested in what she was going through, and was totally indifferent toward her awakening. So she moved out, and isolated herself from everyone, and that isolation provoked her affair with Alcee Arobin with whom Edna's sexuality fully flowered.

Edna's rebellion also involves satisfaction of her physical desires, which was totally accomplished by her sexual relationship with Alcee Arobin. The more time they were spending together, the more Edna's sexual desire was pressing her from inside, seeking expression. Alcee's kiss was "the first kiss of her life to which her nature really responded. It was a flaming torch that kindled desire" (Chopin 218). Alcee Arobin was an outlet for her animalistic desires, which were satisfied through their sexual intercourse. Edna succumbed to his seductions after she had confessed to Mademoiselle Reisz her love for Robert, and it seemed ironic that she gave herself to one man, after admitting her love for another, but in Edna's case, the two acts were joined, because they were part of her development, and passionate release. By admitting and accepting love in one moment, she got strength to pursue it in another. Edna furthers her self-realization, and promises that she would never again be the possession of another, which can be seen in her relationship with Alcee that was based only on physical pleasure without any emotions. She saw him as a person who served only for satisfaction of her erotic fantasies, and that relationship did not consume her life, because it did not prevent her from pursuing any other aspect of her awakening. It just served to calm her sexual desires. By moving out from the Pontellier mansion, Edna thought that she would escape

social conventions, and stop being a possession of her husband. Furthermore, the movement to another house where she would live alone was a door to her independence and freedom. She would be free to do whatever she wants, moreover, it was a first practical step in realization of her relationship with Robert. Edna thought that by freeing herself of the financial dependence that bound her to Leonce, she could clear the path for a relationship with a man whom she loved. Life in isolation provided her with freedom, and allowed her to progress in her sexual awakening, but it led her to solitude, which could be alleviated only by lust and sexual pleasure with a man whom she did not love, but who completed her sexual awakening. Even then she was infatuated with Robert, and although her physical needs were satisfied by Alcee, she continues to long for Robert, which can be seen in the following lines: "There was a dull pang of regret because it was not the kiss of love which had inflamed her, because it was not love which had held this cup of life to her lips" (Chopin 219).

## **7. Edna's Final, Tragic Awakening**

When Robert returns, the romantic, dreamlike meeting that Edna had imagined was not romantic at all. On the contrary, it was full of tension, and without any greater feelings:

A hundred times Edna had pictured Robert's return, and imagined their first meeting. It was usually at her home, whither he had sought her out at once. She always fancied him expressing or betraying in some way his love for her. And here, the reality was that they sat ten feet apart, she at the window, crushing geranium leaves in her hand and smelling them, he twirling around on the piano stool, saying: "I was very much surprised to hear of Mr Pontellier's absence." (Chopin 256,257).

As it can be seen the first meeting was a disappointment, and it did not meet her expectations, but still she thought that their relationship could be realized. On their way to her new home, when Robert tells her: "I never knew you in your home" (Chopin 258), Edna's reply: "I am glad you did not" (Chopin 258) reveals her unrealistic expectations for their relationship. She thinks that her moving out of the family house and living alone could erase her past life, and that her new independence could erase her prior identity. Robert's behaviour shows that he does not believe that past can be so easily forgotten. He continues to call her by her married name, he mentions her husband Leonce several times, and refers to the Pontellier mansion as her home. They have been

misunderstanding each other since their first meeting. While their relationship at Grand Isle was harmonious, here in New Orleans it was filled with miscommunication, and Edna faced the reality and realized that "the longing she felt for the unattainable beloved is the source of her hopelessness and depression as well as the motivation of her life to this point" (Franklin 524). She fell into a passive state and "abandoned herself to Fate, and awaited the consequences with indifference" (Chopin 271). Edna was being dragged down by her depression, and this passivity, which was a product of her depressive state, symbolizes her psychological destruction and exhaustion to the point of doing nothing except letting herself to Fate. When Edna and Robert finally speak honestly of their feelings for one another, she begins to undergo the tragic, final revelation of her awakening. He continues to understand male-female relations as those between possessor and possession, and when Edna stresses that she is not a possession that Leonce Pontellier or anyone else can "dispose or not" (Chopin 282), because she gives herself whom she chooses, Robert is appalled at her open rebellion against the society and its norms. Edna used to see her relationship with Robert as something that would liberate her from conventions and a life with him as one of the goals of her liberation, but now she realized that her relationship with Robert would be like running back to the old male-female relations, which made her disappointment only stronger. The society exerts a great influence on Robert, and he is too weak to go against the collective. He felt passion for Edna, but it was not strong enough to make him break the social norms and join her. The man for whom Edna awakened, and was ready to do anything for him, was a coward who again refused to trespass the boundaries of social convention, and who left her with a note on which the following sentence was written: "I love you. Good-by – because I love you" (Chopin 294). That was the final, tragic awakening of Edna Pontellier when she realized the depth of her solitude.

After Robert had left her for the second time, she saw that she was totally alone, still trapped by the same society, and shackled to its expectations and norms. Her children were those who provided those shackles, and after everything she had done, and been through, she understood that the children, and not the men, were important, because she would forever have obligations toward them, so "she had said over and over to herself: '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 but Raoul and Etienne'" (Chopin 299). Her final sadness and feeling of hopelessness is not a result of her fear of being a dependant, but of the fact that somebody else, in her case the children, are depending on her. They are small, weak, vulnerable, and their happiness and social reputation are great deal depending on

their mother, and that caused in Edna a feeling of oppression. Her own children appeared before her like "antagonists" who had "overcome" and "overpowered" her, and who "sought to drag her into the soul's slavery" (Chopin 300). Edna could not return to her unhappy marriage with Leonce, because, by doing so, she would betray herself, and at that moment the only thing that was acceptable to her was to kill herself. Her suicide affirms her statement that for the sake of the children she would sacrifice her life, but not herself. By killing herself she would preserve her children's reputation, and save them from being looked down as children whose mother was a shameless adulteress. Also, by doing that she would preserve her integrity. In the end Edna's awakening turned out to be a path to her total destruction and death, because she was living in a society that did not let her live her newly born self, and her newly born sexuality. She tried to live it, but it was not accepted by the collective. Edna was not the only one who had such problems. That was the problem of many women in that time, but she was the only one who tried to change something. In the end she saw that neither she could fight alone against the whole society nor she could live the life she lived, so she decided to kill herself, because that was the only way out of that vicious circle. Her intention was to surrender her body to the sea at the same place where her rebirth, awakening happened. She stood there naked, and felt "like some new born creature, opening its eyes in a familiar world that it had never known" (Chopin 301). She was totally herself, without any layers of her prior identity, looking at death as liberation that would lead her to that limitless state which she always wanted to achieve. She was not afraid of death, because it will provide her the freedom and peace she always wanted. Many would judge her suicide as an act of cowardice, and they would call her weak, because she should have stayed, and lived her life in isolation showing her strength while helping her children during their self-realizations, but if she had done that, she would have been the prisoner of the society which she could not escape from. Her suicide was her last rebellion against the time she lived in. It is an expression of her own will, because she refuses to be tied down and to sacrifice herself. She bravely sacrifices her life in order to maintain her integrity and independence. By drowning herself in the sea, which represents power, infinity, and strength, she found her freedom and peace, because only through death she could defeat social conventions of her time.

## **8. Conclusion**

This diploma paper on Edna Pontellier's awakening gave us insight into the life, emotions, and development of a woman who was in a way going ahead of her time, and was trying to escape the time she lived in. Trapped in an unhappy marriage, surrounded by the Creoles, and shackled to the social conventions, she lost herself, and lived her life half-awake. She was different from the rest of the society, had different goals in her life, and different perception of life in general. She had to suppress her real self, her yearnings, wishes and desires, so that she could live in such conditions. Chopin has shown the position of a woman in the late nineteenth century, and through the character of rebellious Edna the problem of many women of that time was represented. Women were subservient to their husbands physically, financially, and psychically. They were treated like possessions, and one romantic soul like Edna Pontellier tried to change the role that was prescribed to her by the society. Through series of little awakenings, which were caused by her friendship with Adele Ratignolle, her love toward Robert Lebrun, her first swim, affair with Alcee Arobin, and many other experiences, we see how Edna becomes aware of her own strength and realizes that she wants to live without being looked as a possession. So she does everything to gain her independence, including breaking the social norms, moving out of her family house, and having a sexual affair which completed her sexual awakening. She awakened to herself, but still she was the prisoner of the collective. After many disappointments, and the final awakening provoked by Robert's leaving which was caused by his fear to confront the society, she totally broke down, and saw her suicide as the only way out of that world in which she did not fit. Chopin perfectly depicted a development and a gradual decline of an romantic, intelligent woman who only wanted to live her life the way she wanted, but could not because of the conventional morality of the society she lived in. She, too, showed the tragical effect that such society can exert on the individual, in this case Edna who found that death was the more acceptable option than life in a society that was intolerant toward every individual that did not blindly follow its conventions and norms.

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## **10. Summary**

This diploma paper elaborately describes the awakening of Edna Pontellier's character. She gains her independence, liberation of her real character and sexual desire through series of little awakenings. Women's position in the late nineteenth century is being discussed, because in this novel, through the character of the main protagonist Edna, Kate Chopin is showing experiences of a woman trapped in that time. With her naturalistic narrative style Chopin has perfectly depicted a woman who was shackled to the Creole society and its norms, and whose life was ruled by the collective. After that, Edna's unhappy marriage, and her Creole surrounding in which she, a Kentucky Protestant, does not fit in, and the beginning of her awakening is being described. Her friendship with Robert Lebrun, and love toward him, initiated her self-awakening and the beginning of her sexual awakening. The experience of her first time swimming alone, when she realized her own strength, symbolizes the awakening of her real self. In much the same way, the excursion with Robert to Cheniere Caminada, where she became aware of her own sexuality, initiated her sexual awakening. Also, her rebellion against the conventional society, breaking of social norms, leaving her husband and children, and her isolation which provoked a sexual affair with Alcee Arobin, with whom Edna's sexuality fully flowered, are stations on her trip to her final, tragic awakening. After Robert's final good-bye, Edna realizes the depth of her solitude, and commits suicide, because this is the only way she could preserve her freedom, integrity, and independence.

## **Keywords**

Kate Chopin, *The Awakening*, Self-Awakening, Sexual Awakening, Self-Awareness, Independence.

## 10.1. Sažetak

Ovaj završni rad detaljno opisuje buđenje lika Edne Pontellier, protagonistice romana *Buđenje*. Kroz niz manjih buđenja ona postiže vlastitu neovisnost, te oslobađanje svoga karaktera i seksualne želje. Rad također proučava položaj žena u kasnom devetnaestom stoljeću, jer je Kate Chopin pomoću glavnog lika, Edne, pokazala iskustva žene zarobljene u tom vremenu. Svojim naturalističkim načinom pripovijedanja Chopin je savršeno prikazala ženu, okovanu kreolskim društvom i njihovim normama, čijim je životom vladalo društvo. Nakon toga, rad opisuje Ednin nesretan brak, kreolsko okruženje u koje se ona, Protestantica iz Kentuckya, nije uklapala, te početak njenog buđenja. Ednino prijateljstvo i ljubav prema Robert Lebrunu su započeli buđenje njenog istinskog karaktera i njeno seksualno buđenje. Njeno iskustvo prvog samostalnog plivanja, kada je shvatila svoju snagu, predstavlja buđenje njenog pravog "ja", a izlet s Robertom na Cheniere Caminadu, gdje je postala svjesna svoje seksualnosti, je započeo njeno seksualno buđenje. U radu se zatim naglašava kako su njena pobuna protiv konvencionalnog društva, kršenje društvenih normi, napuštanje muža i djece, te njena izoliranost koja je uzrokovala seksualnu aferu s Alcee Arobinom, s kim je Ednina seksualnost u potpunosti procvjetala, samo stanice na njenom putovanju ka konačnom, tragičnom buđenju. Ono se događa nakon Robertovog odlaska; ona shvaća ozbiljnost svoje samoće, što ju dovodi do samoubojstva. Samoubojstvo predstavlja jedini način Ednina očuvanja njezine slobode, integriteta i neovisnosti.

## Ključne riječi

Kate Copin, *Buđenje*, buđenje istinskog karaktera, seksualno buđenje, samosvjesnost, neovisnost.