

Nature as a Transformative Force: Mapping Edna Pontellier's Awakening—From Societal Conformity to Self-Recognition in Kate Chopin's The Awakening

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Keywords: Kate Chopin, *The Awakening*, American Naturalism, Nature, Female Awakening

Abstract: This thesis focuses on Kate Chopin's *The Awakening* and explores the intricate interaction between nature and Edna Pontellier's journey of self-awakening. This thesis adopts a naturalistic perspective, primarily employing textual analysis as its core research methodology to explore the role of nature in female awakening. Through in-depth examination, three dimensions emerge as particularly pivotal: the encounter and interplay between Edna and Mariequita; Edna's spiritual metamorphosis in Chênère Caminada; and the profound interaction between Edna and the ocean. These elements collectively reveal that nature assumes a guiding role in Edna's awakening. Acting as a transformative force, nature leads Edna to shed the shackles of urban civilization and its attendant social indoctrination, enabling her to gradually embrace her primal, instinctual self, her animalistic essence, and thus achieve genuine awakening. This awakening ultimately empowers her to break free from the constraints of the traditional feminine role bound to domestic chores and maternal duties.

1. Introduction

Kate Chopin's *The Awakening* has long stood as a pivotal work in American literary history, renowned for its unflinching exploration of female self-discovery amid the rigid gender norms of 19th-century patriarchal society. This thesis will analyze Edna's awakening from a naturalistic perspective, focusing on how the nature, primarily the sea, shapes her psychological awakening, fuels her desire for freedom, and ultimately influences her fate.

This thesis centers on three pivotal dimensions of Edna's engagement with nature, tracing how these encounters dismantle her adherence to societal expectations and ignite her quest for identity, autonomy, and emotional authenticity. The first chapter centers on Edna's fateful encounter with Mariequita, a local seaside girl who acts as a living incarnation of nature itself, a vessel through which the sea establishes a dialogue with Edna. By interacting with Mariequita, Edna begins to comprehend the possibility of female existence untethered from the social constraints, gendered obligations, and cultural scripts that define her own civilized experience. Chapter two explores how Chênère Caminada's natural environment unlocks Edna's repressed emotions, shifting her from the state of

rational compliance to that of vivid, unguarded feeling. This chapter examines these shifts not as trivial acts of sentimentality, but as critical steps in Edna's awakening. The final chapter turns its focus to Edna's intimate communion with the sea, delving into her quiet yet resolute struggle to break free from the shackles of patriarchal constraint, to reconstruct her fractured sense of self and carve out a rightful, unyielding place for herself in the world. Immersing herself in the sea, Edna truly knows herself, not as Mrs. Pontellier, but as Edna: a woman with desires and the right to exist beyond the roles assigned to her.

To sum up, by examining these specific, interconnected moments of Edna's interaction with nature, this thesis seeks to deepen our understanding of Chopin's exploration of nature and female awakening—not as abstract themes, but as lived, sensory experiences that drive Edna's rebellion against a society that seeks to diminish her.

2. Lady and Vixen

Mariequita may serve as a paradigmatic illustration of how communion with nature shapes the individual. On her way to the wharf, Edna first encounters Mariequita, “a young barefooted Spanish girl, with a red kerchief on her head and a basket on her arm” (Chopin, Chopin,67)^[2]. When Mariequita approaches closer to her, Edna is immediately attracted by “the sand and slime between her brown toes” (Chopin,67)^[2]. Instead of being overwhelmed by Edna's scrutiny, Mariequita feels no shame about her “broad and coarse” (Chopin,67)^[2] feet and persists to keep them exposed. Mariequita's dark skin, bare feet and her indifference towards the stains on her feet evidently demonstrate the wildness in her and her courage of ignoring others' views about herself in a civilized society. Beyond her indifference to the perceptions of others, Mariequita conducts herself with unflinching boldness and forthrightness, never hesitating to give unvarnished voice to her feelings. When confronted with Edna's steady gaze, she does not recoil but instead addresses Robert directly, demanding an explanation. Her candor manifests in the simple yet incisive questions she poses about love, intimacy and the nature of Robert and Edna's bond which compel the pair to confront the very issues they have labored to evade.

Mariequita's living milieu might be one contributor to her character. Living on Grand Isle beside the boundless sea, Mariequita has more control over herself, and the absence of the government of civilization offers Mariequita more opportunities to develop her potential. Grand Isle, compared to the city of New Orleans, is a place that has not been ‘civilized’ yet and is dominated by the savagery of nature. In other words, the individuals on Grand Isle are more subjected to the power of nature than civilization and are encouraged by such power to follow the guidance of their emotions. Thus, in Mariequita's perspective, there is no shame in voicing one's love and emotions, and every individual is entitled to pursue their affections with unwavering boldness.

On the contrary to Mariequita, Edna is marked by the features of civilization. Edna is one of those women who possesses luxurious garments for different occasions and “performs time-consuming rituals of dress, preparing her toilette several times a day” (Mathews, 131)^[4]. Dresses in the context of *The Awakening* is not merely clothes for women, but the embodiment of the patriarchal civilization. It is by dressing elegantly and discrepantly according to different time and occasions that Edna is qualified as a valuable society woman. Edna's decision of giving up her reception days provokes her husband's anger and causes the quarrels between them, which “serves as one of many reminders of Edna's initial lack of autonomy and self-ownership” (Mathews, 131)^[4]. Though civilization elevates Edna to a social stratum far loftier than Mariequita's, her autonomy is concurrently eroded by the inescapable emphasis on her societal obligations.

The interplay between Mariequita and Edna may be construed as a subtle, proxy engagement that refracts the unspoken dialogue between nature and Edna herself. As a maiden nurtured in the ocean's

embrace, Mariequita stands as a living testament to the sea's profound formative power: she embodies how the maritime milieu shapes human identity with a potency and particularity utterly distinct from the sterile, confining influence of the urban sphere. Beyond mere illustration, her singular disposition, rooted in the sea's wildness and unpolished by societal strictures, stirs Edna to confront a radical revelation: that womanhood need not be bound to the domestic and the prescribed, but might unfold in ways both unruly and authentic within an untamed natural setting.

3. Emotion and Reason

Chênère Caminada “becomes the setting where Chopin reveals the extent of Edna’s transformation from civilized lady to sensual woman” (Jones, 122)^[3]. Although Edna crosses the boundary several times on Grand Isle, she is then inevitably pulled back into the oppressive sphere of her life and is not able to truly free herself until she visits Chênère Caminada.

“Sailing across the bay to the Chênère Caminada, Edna felt that as if she were being borne away from some anchorage which had held her fast, whose chain had been loosening” (Chopin,68)^[2]. The sea functions as the portal towards another primitive and free world and insulates what prevents Edna from awakening. When Edna is still on Grand Isle, she is offended by Robert’s story and considers it “to be his flippancy” (Chopin,58)^[2]. Still remaining rational on Grand Isle at that moment, Edna is conscious of the safe distance that she should keep between her and Robert. However, when Edna sets foot on Chênère Caminada, she does not reject Robert’s story about adventure anymore and even immerses herself in the fantasy world, conceiving a future where she and Robert can share and spend the treasure together.

After Edna’s rest at Madame Antoine’s cot, “her eyes were bright and wide awake and her face glowed” (Chopin,71)^[2]. Her emotion has now replaced the governing position of reason and serves as the chief motif of Edna’s actions. Without being guided by Robert’s sentiment, Edna takes the initiative to create her own imaginary romance, as she jokes that it has been one hundred years later when she wakes up. As the narrator describes what Edna sees, “the shadows lengthened and crept out like stealthy, grotesque monsters across the grass” (Chopin,73)^[2]. It is through the narrator’s mouth that Edna’s change is delivered to the readers. Rather than taking the shadows as something that is formed by the obscuration of light, Edna considers them lived and are able to think. The natural environment around Edna has become a fairy tale world due to her changed way of thinking.

Moreover, Edna starts to recognize and demonstrate the animality in herself, as Jones argues, Edna is governed by her instincts on Chênère Caminada and “eats with animal-like relish” (122)^[3]. Under the influence of her emerging animality, Edna does not evade her sexuality or hesitate to pursue ‘free love’. As Edna succumbs to her sexual instinct to a greater extent, she and Robert become closer, not only spiritually, but also physically. Edna actively makes physical contacts with Robert and regards it as sensual enjoyment, not as offense or taboo anymore.

4. Identity and Position

Thus far, this thesis has centered on the sea’s influence on Edna as mediated by specific agencies, what follows will concentrate on the unmediated interplay between Edna and the sea. The enlightening effect of the sea may be attributed to its wildness and isolation from the outer world. As Auden claims that ocean is the place where individual “is either free from both the evils and the responsibilities of communal life [...] characterized by the absence of limitation” (15-6)^[1]. Therefore, the alien and exotic environment of the ocean serves as the best catalyst for Edna’s awakening.

Though the rest of Edna’s interactions with the sea are overshadowed by her first swim, they should not be ignored or excluded from the analyses of the text. After Edna arrives at Grand Isle, she is periodically enchanted by the seductive voice of the sea but is unable to decode the message until

she goes to the beach with Robert. Edna begins 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,34)^[2]. At that moment, Edna starts to view herself as an individual who exists independently beyond the control of her husband and children. Her growing understanding about her place in the society stimulates her correction of her way of living. When Edna is still a little girl, she is aware of her dual life “that outward existence which conforms, the inward life which questions” (Chopin,39)^[2] There is an ostensible balance between the external and internal worlds, but under the disguise, it is the external force that dominates Edna’s life. Allured by the sea, Edna begins to rearrange her dual life, redefining the boundaries between these two worlds and establishing her own rules. But the approach towards victory still remains ambiguous for Edna, because she is still in the initial stage of awakening, where she is limited to merely identify the problems.

Edna’s first swim is the most outstanding interaction with the sea and influences Edna most profoundly. When Edna is surrounded by the water, the spirit of the ocean reaches her directly and delivers messages to her without any agencies. Besides, her first swim is the turning point of Edna’s life and the second stage of her awakening. The intimate contact with the sea does not only dispel Edna’s “ungovernable dread” (Chopin, 56)^[2] about water and even her life, but also contributes to Edna’s clearer perception of her identity and position in the world. The power of internal world dramatically exceeds that of the outer world when Edna successfully learns how to swim in the sea. At that moment, Edna completely escapes the limits of the outer word and is governed by her inner desires, behaving “like the little tottering, stumbling, clutching child, who of a sudden realizes its powers, and walks for the first time alone” (Chopin,56)^[2]. The maternal sea lends Edna the strength to start her new life in a field where she is unfamiliar with, and to observe the world with the principles of her own. Edna’s self that awakens in the sea “insists upon its own inviolability, that will brook no interference from others” (Ringe, 584)^[5]. As a consequence, Edna refuses to “join the group in their sports and bouts” (Chopin,56)^[2] and strives to keep her journey in the ocean private and undisturbed. It becomes evident for Edna that she does not belong to the community and her destination is located somewhere near the horizon and conquering the ocean, an infinite and unknown world, should be her ultimate destiny. But “the expansive feeling of striving towards the infinite is not to last” (Ringe 583)^[5], as Edna is soon overwhelmed by the fear of death and hastily swims back. In this way, the energy offered by the sea could scarcely help Edna to reach her destination.

5. Conclusion

This thesis investigates the interaction between nature and Edna Pontellier in Kate Chopin’s *The Awakening*, with a specific focus on how nature facilitates Edna’s process of awakening. The research identifies three core dimensions of Edna’s awakening catalyzed by nature. First, Edna gains an insightful understanding of nature’s impact on the individual, particularly recognizing the distinct roles that nature and urban civilization play in shaping individual characteristics. Second, she becomes aware that nature tends to awaken her sensibilities; this awareness further leads her to comprehend the essence of being a more intuitive and emotionally attuned person. Third, the sea—an iconic natural element in the novel—enables Edna to redefine her position in the world and her self-identity, breaking free from the confining labels of a patriarchal society, such as being merely a wife and mother.

This study contributes to the existing scholarship on *The Awakening* by illuminating the intricate dynamics between nature and the protagonist’s awakening, thereby offering a valuable perspective for subsequent research on the novel. However, the research has certain limitations. Most notably, the analysis of the sea, a central natural symbol, remains insufficiently profound. Future studies could delve deeper into the impact of sea on human being and how the coastal environment of Grand Isle

influences the inhabitants. Additionally, adopting a comparative approach would enrich the research—contrasting *The Awakening* with other works of similar themes to explore how nature functions differently in shaping the awakening of female characters across various literary contexts.

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