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## **On the Disillusionment of the Quest for Female Identity in *The Awakening***

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### **Abstract**

*The Awakening* is a classic work by Kate Chopin, a famous American novelist of the late 19th century. It describes the whole process of the heroine Edna's quest for her identity from the initial awakening to the final disillusionment. This paper mainly explains the process of Edna's search for identity and the causes of its collapse.

**Keywords:** *The Awakening*; female consciousness; identity quest

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### **1. Introduction**

#### **1.1 Kate Chopin's Profile**

Kate Chopin was born Katherine O'Flaherty. She was an American female writer born in Saint Louis, Missouri, USA during the 19th century. Her father, Thomas Chopin, was a successful Irish businessman who died in a car accident when Kate was four years old. Since then, she had lived in a female-dominated household. From her mother, grandmother, great-grandmother and other women, Kate experienced the strong will of those respected women. Kate Chopin received an excellent and good education from an early age. She loved to read, especially the works of Dickens and the Bronte sisters, and Kate Chopin was also proficient in music theory and played the piano. In 1870, Kate Chopin married Oscar. Unfortunately, a few years after Kate married him, her husband, Oscar, died. Since then, Kate Chopin had returned to her hometown to start a new life. She raised six children and made a living by writing. Many of her novels are concerned with women's rights and feelings. Her works depict women's pursuit of self-independence in marriage and in the whole of

social life. Kate Chopin has been called “one of the pioneers of American feminist literature” due to the fact that “She inherited a rich and complex tradition, integrating not only the spirit of American female pioneers, but also the characteristics of American Transcendentalism, European Realism, and late 19th century feminism and aestheticism.” (Martin & Elliot 13)

## 1.2 Writing Background

In the 1890s, when it was still a patriarchal Victorian era, the society advocated sexual repression, especially among middle-and upper-class women. When Chopin created the work, a series of social changes and conflicts brought “Women’s issues” to the public, and these discussions influenced Chopin’s work. In Louisiana, the background of the novel at the time, women were the legal property of their husbands; as a Catholic-dominated area, the divorce rate was very low and women were expected to be loyal to their husbands. (Ziff 72) As a result, the publication of *The Awakening* caused an uproar at that time and was severely attacked by critics. In the early 1970s, the women’s movement had led people to rediscover Chopin and her works. *The Awakening* is regarded as a feminist literary classic created by the American female writer and a pioneering work of feminism.

## 1.3 Overview of *The Awakening*

The story began in the late 19th century on Grand Isle, a popular summer retreat for wealthy French descendants in nearby New Orleans. The heroine of the story, Edna, was vacationing here with her husband, Léonce, and their two children. Although her husband was very kind to her, he often had no time to spend with her due to his busy work, which allowed Edna to spend time with Robert often. The two often went to the beach to walk and chat. With the passage of time, the two simple relationships began to have a subtle change. But Robert realized the impossibility of the relationship and abruptly left for Mexico to avoid further development of the relationship. Edna lost her mind when she lost Robert. After returning to New Orleans from her vacation, she began to immerse herself in painting. Forsaking all social responsibilities, Léonce left Edna at home on a business trip to New York while the child was picked up by her grandmother. Edna gave up her old way of life completely. She moved into her own cabin “Pigeon” nest, by painting for a living, and claimed to be independent. (Ye 64) The unforgettable Robert returned to New Orleans and for the first time confessed his love to Edna, which rekindled it. She explained to Robert that she did not belong to anyone and that she could be with Robert without her husband’s consent, which struck Robert as odd. He eventually left. She found that even Robert could not understand her, nor could her husband, and that she was a prisoner of her children. Finally, faced with the conflict between self and society, ideal and reality, Edna chose suicide. She would rather die than give up the newly awakened self, and she died to defend the freedom and independence that she yearned for.

## 2. The process of questing Edna’s identity

### 2.1 The initial stage of identity quest---Awareness

There are many reasons for Edna’s awareness in the initial stage of the identity quest.

Firstly, she has the quality of awareness at a young age. For example, when she told Madame Adèle Ratignolle about her childhood memories, she said, “The hot wind beating in my face made me think-without any connection that I can trace of a summer day in Kentucky, of a meadow that seemed as big as the ocean to the very little girl walking through the grass, which was higher than her waist. She threw out her arms as if swimming when she walked, beating the tall grass as one strikes out in the water.” (Chopin 20) From this, it can be clearly seen that she wants to learn to swim and longs for freedom. There is another example. “Likely

as not it was Sunday,” she laughed; “and I was running away from prayers, from the Presbyterian service, read in a spirit of gloom by my father that chills me yet to think of.” (Chopin 21) Edna’s resistance to her father in this conversation is also a reflection of the quality of awareness she had at an early age.

Secondly, Edna’s weak sense of self-awareness was triggered by her dissatisfaction with the reality of her marriage. Outwardly, Edna is gentle and virtuous, lives a well-fed life, has an enviable family, a husband who is considered the best, and even has money at her own disposal. On Tuesday afternoons she received visitors in her fine dress and spent the whole afternoon in the drawing-room. For six years after her marriage, she had been repeating this monotonous routine as if it were a religious ritual. (Chang 76) In the face of her husband’s censure, she always chose to endure, because of her husband’s deep affection for and loyalty to her, but in her view, her own grievances and her husband’s affection for and loyalty to her, are nothing.

Although Edna was materially rich, she was spiritually empty. Her husband only regarded her as a private property and did not pay attention to her real feelings. “What folly! To bathe at such an hour in such heat!” exclaimed Mr. Pontellier. (Chopin 6) “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 7) From these words, it can be seen that in Pontellier’s eyes, Edna was just a precious and beautiful vase in the family, a capital to show off to outsiders. In a way, Edna had no understanding or respect from her husband. So, when her husband came home in the middle of the night and deliberately scolded her for not looking after the children because of her indifference, “An indescribable oppression, which seemed to generate in some unfamiliar part of her consciousness, filled her whole being with a vague anguish. It was like a shadow, like a mist passing across her soul’s summer day. It was strange and unfamiliar; it was a mood.” (Chopin 11) From here, her inner rebellion and the pursuit of self-awareness began.

Thirdly, Robert’s company contributed to Edna’s awareness. On Grand Isle, Robert’s company made Edna feel a respect she had never felt with other men. “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. This may seem like a ponderous weight of wisdom to descend upon the soul of a young woman of twenty-eight---perhaps more wisdom than the Holy Ghost is usually pleased to vouchsafe to any woman.” (Chopin 17) At this point, Edna began to have a deeper sense of self.

Fourthly, Ratignolle and Miss Reisz had a respectively negative and positive effect on Edna’s awareness.

Adèle Ratignolle is a stereotypical representative of the selfless mother and angel in the Victorian era. Adèle Ratignolle’s female image represents the perfect “angel” women in the patriarchal society at that time. The novel tells the story of Adèle Ratignolle, who never took the initiative to let go of her sewing work during the nine months from pregnancy to childbirth. “There are no words to describe her saving the old ones that have served so often to picture the bygone heroine of romance and the fair lady of our dreams.” (Chopin 12) Adèle Ratignolle’s meets the social definition of women and embodies the virtue and charm of women in the society at that time, which is actually defined by the patriarchal society. “Madame Ratignolle had been married seven years. About every two years she had a baby. At that time, she had three babies, and was beginning to think of a fourth one.” (Chopin 13) From here, we can see that her body becomes a receptacle for patriarchal society. The pregnancy of the Ratignolle symbolizes the physical confinement and restraint of women by the socialized form of patriarchy, and thus women are firmly imprisoned in the role of “mother”. From the Ratignolle’s point of view, she has no resistance to the role of women defined by men. So, she played a negative role in Edna’s awakening.

As a reclusive monster artist, Miss Reisz stirs Edna’s nerves to depart from patriarchal traditions and established female roles and pursue her own identity. In the novel, Miss Reisz is a single woman who is financially strapped and lonely, as well as a pianist who can play short but evocative piano pieces. Patriarchal

society always suppresses and denies the wisdom and talent of women. As a maverick artist, Miss Reisz's existence is rejected and criticized by the people around her, and she has a marginalized social role. (Wang 66) In the novel, Edna finds that Miss Reisz is rejected and ignored by her former neighbors when she tries to find Miss Reisz's residence. "She hastened to a neighboring grocery store, feeling sure that Mademoiselle would have left her address with the proprietor. He knew Mademoiselle Reisz had a good deal better than he wanted to know her and he informed his questioner. In truth, he did not want to know her at all, or anything concerning her---the most disagreeable and unpopular woman who ever lived in Bienville Street." (Chopin 63) It can be seen that the patriarchal society rejected and denied the wise women who refused to play the established female role. When Miss Reisz finished playing "Solitude", "she saw no pictures of solitude, of hope, of longing, or of despair. But the very passions themselves were aroused within her 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 30) Miss Reisz's piano playing had a very important influence on Edna's self-awareness. It further urges Edna to break free from the shackles of women and pursue liberation and independence.

There are also many performances for Edna's awareness in the initial stage of the identity quest.

On the one hand, learning to swim was the turning point in her awareness. After being deeply moved by Miss Reisz's piano music that night, she came to the sea. "She 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. She could have shouted for joy. She did shout for joy, as with a sweeping stroke or two she lifted her body to the surface of the water." (Chopin 32) Learning to swim gave her a new understanding of herself, gave her new strength and new hope, and inspired her to become the complete master of her body and soul. "A feeling of exultation overtook her, as if some power of significant importance had been given her to control the working of her body and soul. She grew daring and reckless, overestimating her strength. She wanted to swim far out, where no woman had swum before." (Chopin 32) From here we can see that Edna is eager to go before women have not gone through the road, and to become the riders of destiny.

On the other hand, the first confrontation with her husband was the second important manifestation of her awareness. The night she learned to swim, she refused her husband's request that she come inside to sleep, and instead stayed out late in the hammock. At first, Mr. Pontellier called her impatiently, but when he found Edna's firmness, he spoke softly and begged. Perhaps, for Edna at the time, it was a special experience she had never had before, before she had the chance to think about what it was. All she wanted to do was stay by herself, unwilling to obey her husband. "Léonce, go to bed," she said, "I mean to stay out here. I don't wish to go in, and I don't intend to. Don't speak to me like that again; I shall not answer you." (Chopin 36) It was the first time that Edna had expressed her different thoughts directly to her husband, which meant her own spiritual awareness.

In a word, four reasons contributed to Edna's awakening, and in the initial stage of identity quest, she learned to swim and tried to fight against patriarchy.

## 2.2 The developing stage of identity quest---Resistance

After Edna's initial awareness, the resistance phase of the identity quest began.

Firstly, she achieved financial independence. At the beginning of the novel, Edna regarded painting as a hobby and her works were extremely unprofessional. Now, painting has become a skill that Edna relies on to survive, and she has begun to seriously consider painting as her career. "I have a little money of my own from my mother's estate, which my father sends me by dribbles. I won a large sum this winter on the races, and I am beginning to sell my sketches." (Chopin 84) From this we can see that she has gained financial independence.

Secondly, she achieved spiritual independence. Every Tuesday, she no longer entertained her husband's

business friends as she used to. She is a mother who loves her children, but she does not want to live for others, including her own children, because she understands that life without self-awareness and independence is meaningless. In order to further get rid of the shackles of social morality and achieve freedom and independence, she moved out of her husband's comfortable and luxurious mansion and lived in her own small house "Dovecote". Here is another example. "Edna and her father had a warm, and almost violent dispute upon the subject of her refusal to attend her sister's wedding." (Chopin 76) She refused to attend her sister's wedding, eager to take a new path, unlike anyone else's path, to become a person who has learned to control her own body and mind, the master of her own self.

She also used other practical actions to show dissatisfaction and resistance to reality. "She turned back into the room and began to walk up and down its whole length, without stopping, without resting. She carried in her hands a thin handkerchief, which she tore into ribbons, rolled into a ball, and flung from her. Once she stopped, and took off her wedding ring, flung it upon the carpet. When she saw it lying there, she stamped her heel upon it, striving to crush it." (Chopin 57) Edna's awakening leads her onto a rebellious path. She begins to resist the male-dominated social system and refuses to submissively play the role of wife and mother assigned by society. "I would give up the unessential; I would give up my money, I would give my life for my children; but I wouldn't give myself. I can't make it much clear; it's only something which I am beginning to comprehend, which is revealing itself to me." (Chopin 52) Edna realizes that she is a person with an independent personality and dignity, and should realize her own value according to human development and needs.

Thirdly, she achieved physical independence. She was in love with Robert. Her love for Robert was the first real expression of her feelings. One could imagine the intensity of the emotion which had been repressed for twenty-eight years when it was released, and she longed for physical and emotional satisfaction. Unfortunately, Robert is not able to return Edna's love in the same way, and Edna can only separate her sexual and emotional needs in order to vent her long-repressed desires. After Robert left, the emotional entanglement between her and another unmarried man, Arobin, is also due to her awakened female consciousness so that she can no longer indulge in depression and loneliness. (Yang 118) When Arobin gives her an unusual kiss, although her sexual consciousness as a woman is strongly shocked, she soon feels "There is a pain in the heart." (Chopin 80) For the kiss that thrilled her was not the kiss of love, for it was not love that brought the fountain of life to her lips.

So, from this part, she achieved financial, spiritual and physical independence on the way of developing stage of identity quest.

### **2.3 The final stage of identity quest- Disillusionment**

After the developing stage of identity quest, the final stage of identity quest is disillusionment.

At the end of the novel, Edna meets her old lover Robert again at a friend's house. They rekindled old feelings. Edna had always believed that Robert, unlike other people, would not consider her as his property. Eventually, when Robert left her, he left her a note. "I love you. Good-by----because I love you." (Chopin 117) Edna's last hope for a patriarchal society is shattered when she realizes that Robert, too, sees her as his property.

This is the best stage of Edna's awakening of female consciousness. In the third stage, Edna finally realizes that no one can understand her and support her in that era. She felt more alone than she had ever felt before. Robert's departure made her realize that she would never be able to live according to her true feelings at that time. Edna is alone on Grand Island, where she and Robert first met. At the beginning of the novel, the author uses the example of learning to swim to show Edna's awakening of female consciousness. At the end of

the novel, the author also uses the example of swimming to reveal Edna's fate. Edna had reached a place most women of that era could not, and she could not go back. At the last moment of her life, she swam out to sea, and although she had no strength left, she did not want to swim back. The fact that she didn't want to go back was a symbol of Edna's resistance to the patriarchal society of the time. At the end of her life, she continued to swim as far as she could, a sign that she wanted to use her death to protest against the social tradition. (Long 94) She wanted to use her death to prove that she had the right to control her own destiny. If she can't live equally freely, she at least has the right to choose her own death.

In the final stage, her identity quest was disillusioned, because she chose to die.

### **3. Reasons for the Disillusionment of identity quest**

#### **3.1 The primary stage of the feminist movement**

At the end of the 19th century, American society was in the primary stage of the feminist movement. At that time, the ethical order was still male-centered, male was at the center of ethical value, and was the architect of history, the founder of the political system and the defender of ethical order. In such a patriarchal society, the family is regarded as the best place to realize the values of women. In the eyes of men, women are just tools for giving birth, the property of a father or husband. Men also hold double moral standards of virginity, normal sexual requirements of women and forced sexual happiness are regarded as debauchery, and extramarital affairs are contrary to women's morality.

#### **3.2 The constraint of patriarchy**

New Orleans, where Edna lived, was a microcosm of American society in the late 19th century. In this world, a patriarchal society requires women to be submissive, abide by patricentric social norms, and suppress inappropriate personality demands. The first is the suppression of Edna by her father. Her father blamed Edna for refusing to attend her sister's wedding. "The Colonel reproached his daughter for her lack of filial kindness and respect, her want of sisterly affection and womanly consideration." (Chopin 74) The second is the suppression of Edna by her husband, who was recognized as the best husband in the world for providing her with superior living conditions. Her daily life is to take care of her husband and children, to hold a banquet, to deal with the guests, to show the charm of the hostess. In such an atmosphere of life, Edna often appeared content with her status. She is gentle and virtuous and does everything her husband says. Despite her frustration, Edna did not resist. In fact, she has lost herself, and her internalized patriarchal values have become the weight of marriage stability, but she is in a state of aphasia in front of her husband and even the society.

#### **3.3 The limits of social morality**

The "Real Woman" advocated by American society in the 19th century consists of four essential qualities: piety, chastity, obedience, and meekness. (Welter 21) These moral norms completely confined women to traditional social circles, especially middle-class women. They have no ego, a lifetime to live for others. Women also have no independent economic status. Victorian women did not have property rights. They were the property of men, the appendages of men, at their disposal. This economic status determines the reality of their oppression and thus prevents them from achieving true equality and independence.

#### **3.4 The low legal status of women**

In the United States in the 19th century, there were many requirements and regulations that severely constrained women in terms of law. The social status of women in the South was even worse. According to

Louisiana law, women are still considered to be the property of their husbands. What society requires women is to be good wives and mothers and family angels. They belong to their fathers before marriage, and belong to the husband after marriage. Women as a large group can't be ignored. They do not have the right to vote, so it is difficult to see women in the political arena. Even if they have a lot of dissatisfaction, there is no spokesman in the political field. They do not have the opportunity to tell some of their own experience. Although women are allowed to work outside the home, most jobs discriminate against women by refusing to hire female employees. As a result, most women can only stay at home and do some chores. (Cather 65) Many states expressly state that married women have the right to enter into contracts, but they cannot own their own property or even control their own income. What is more, if the couple divorced, the wife, for whatever reason, could not obtain custody of the children. In their world, the perfect wife is the best place to take care of her husband and children, not in politics and business to show their talent, otherwise it will be considered out of line. (Cao 90)

#### **4. Conclusion**

Through explaining the process of Edna's search for identity, this paper shows her courage to break through the shackles and pursue self-awareness boldly. Although Edna's search for identity ended in death, her image was the forerunner of the women's liberation movement in the patriarchal era. *The Awakening* has established its status as a classic work with its unconventional creative techniques, advanced ideology and bold character design. Kate Chopin is a pioneer of feminism and has a significant influence on the later feminist writers.

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