



## The Concept of 'Life & Death' and 'Innocence & Maturity' in Kate Chopin's *The Awakening*: Formal Criticism

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**Abstract.** *This study employs the formalism theory. Furthermore, aligning with it, the used of qualitative method to embark the information inherently exists as linguistic. It bears relevance to the focus of this research, that being novels, with the researcher endeavoring to scrutinize the characters' perspectives, viewpoints, and conduct within their fictional environment. The novel, The Awakening is utter the journey of unique married woman, Mrs. Edna Pontellier, to unfold the secret of 'Edna'. From the analysis indicated there were two major ironies which majorly decorated the progress of the story, and those are 'life and death' and 'innocence and maturity'. By bringing 'Edna' the main character, into a consciousness, she would awaken from seemingly an innocent woman through challenging journey to acknowledge maturity in herself. Even though, ironically, in order to maintain her 'life' in the end she has to face 'death' but at least she had been tried to complete her journey to be an whole self.*

**Keywords:** *Formalism, Irony Concept, Literary Study, Structuralism, The Awakening.*

### 1. INTRODUCTION

Actually when Kate Chopin's *The Awakening* was published in 1899, it immediately created major debate among the literary critics and scholars of the late Victorian period, who were not really impressed by her depiction of a woman protagonist with active sexual desires, who dares to leave her husband and her children, falls in love with a man younger than her, and has an affair with another man. Although, at the time when it was published, the novel and the author were severely condemned by the literary and religious circles thus as the result it was claimed as unconventional and immoral work of art.

In the other hand, in the 1960s (the period in which the feminist movement, known as the second wave) *The Awakening* was rediscovered by the feminist scholars and theorists who regarded Edna Pontellier, Chopin's protagonist, as a prototype of feminism. She was claimed to be "a woman before her time" who questions the institution of marriage, has sexual desires of her own, and becomes completely independent of her husband. However, considering the period in which the novel was written, the author or feminist point of view, this analysis will merely focus on the essential elements of the text thus then it would unfold the essence meaning of this beauty work of art.

The key role in *The Awakening* is Edna. Her last quarter life becomes the highlight conflict that widely resemble woman feeling. It's not about marriage institution, woman deprivation, motherhood or man domination, but *The Awakening* is dig deep about the simple yet conflicting puzzle, which is called as woman. As some proverb said that 'secret makes a woman, woman' *The Awakening* is utter the journey of unique married woman, Mrs. Edna Pontellier, to unfold the secret of 'Edna'. Similar with another Chopin's work, *The Awakening* also keeps gallons of irony inside. However, there two major ironies which majorly decorated the progress of the story, and those are 'life and death' and 'innocence and maturity'. Because of that the secret that disguise herself as ironies are challenging and important to discover further regarding another issues around *The Awakening* itself.

## **2. REVIEW OF RELATED LITERATURE**

Formalism represents a specific theoretical framework within contemporary literary studies. The impact of Saussure on the formalist approach was evident in their inclination to systematically analyze literary texts. The intention of this theory is to ascertain the connection among the various components found in a literary piece, in order to ascertain the cohesiveness of its structure and subject matter through exploration of literary features, poetic devices, connections, contradictions and more. The central goal of formalism involves the objective investigation of literary works. This stems from the core formalist idea that conducting such research is not only feasible but also suitable. They view literary texts as tangible entities constructed from words. Formalists expanded their focus beyond poetry as the single study domain, while also eliminating methodologies that detach or isolate literary creations.

## **3. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY**

The researcher use literary criticism method to analyze the literary work. Literary criticism is the study, discussion, evaluation, and interpretation of literature. The theory of formalism is relevant to the research because it aims to analyze the plot of the novel *The Awakening*. This study aims to analyze the intrinsic elements of the story in the novel *The Awakening*, so it employs formalism theory because, according to them, what is truly literary is the inside, whereas the story is merely raw material that still requires authorial processing. Furthermore, the goal of formalism theory is to analyze literary elements to determine the integration of elements in literary works that form the integrity of content and form.

## 4. DISCUSSION

### The plot

When firstly read *The Awakening*, the point of view of the story is third singular omniscient narrator. The narrator tells the story in the point of view of Mr. Pontillier, the narrator explains his appearance, his surrounding and his thought. Then in second chapter, it focuses on Mrs. Edna Pontillier but the narrator does not explain her or other characters thoroughly. It resembles *'the innocence'* phase of the main character. There are many objects and description that utterance by the narrator that gives briefs symbolism of Edna condition, such as a green and yellow parrot, the husband protest over Edna hand burn, or Edna reaction toward the ring. As the story develop, the narrator changing over and over, in Edna point of view, Mr. Pontillies point of view or another character. It gives the reader extended explanation of each character that color Edna life. Thus when near in the end of the story, in almost fifth last chapter, the narrator is Edna itself. It is an illusion that at that time, Edna nearly uncovers her true self; she found the key to open her *'maturity'* case. The reader can easily drown into Edna feeling, thought and conflict because she openly describes her secret. Then, finally in the last chapter, the point of view back into the very beginning style, third singular omniscient narrator, it showed that Chopin consciously lead the reader to suspect the real reason of Edna suicide.

### The setting

Second elements which emphasis Edna transformation is the setting. The most prominent place which holds the key of *'innocent and maturity'* and *'life and death'* is The Grand Isle. The novel opens on Grand Isle, Louisiana, where Léonce Pontellier and his family are vacationing. In this place, Edna begins to undress her innocence piece by piece. the structure of the house also foreshadowing her destinies related with the Robert and Adele. "... *across the narrow "bridges" which connected the Leburn cottage one with the other*" (ch. 1). Her meeting with Robert Lebrun, twenty-six year old son of the resort owner, and Adèle Ratignolle, a wealthy young Creole woman. Edna sketches while considering how different she is from the motherly Adèle. When Robert talks Edna into a swim, she feels the voice of the sea calling to her. She begins to recognize herself as an individual, one who has been leading a dual life. Several days later Edna and Adèle go to the beach, where they see two young lovers followed by a lady in black who is reading her morning devotions. Edna shares that she feels like she did as a young girl, wandering aimlessly and unguided through a green meadow. As Adèle comforts her, Edna thinks about the young men she loved before marrying Léonce, and her children, whom she loves but does not feel suited to mother. Adele's music, Robert and her

first encounter with the sea awaken her maturity and light up her life passion. That realization is a first signal of losing 'innocence'.

The setting then move on into Esplanade Street, Edna home in New Orleans, she finds herself unable to return to her household and societal duties. In the beginning of chapter XVII, Mr. Pontilier main house describe as a charming, wide, and dazzling house, all decoration, paintings and magnificent furniture are Mr. Pontilier's possession. It also remind the reader that in this house, Edna suppose to realize and behave as a good wife and mother which have to resembles her husband status. Which is it hardly fulfilled by her.

*"...within the doors the appointments were perfect after the conventional type...He greatly valued his possession, chiefly because they were his..." (ch. 17)*

Because of Edna struggle to break free she moves out into her Pigeon house. As the name of setting, pigeon is special bird which symbolizes 'love'. And in this small house, Edna had a close relationship with Alcée Arobin then she also accidently meets with her true passion, Robert, which led her back to the awakening place, the former setting, Grand Isle, which is also becomes a place where she realize her maturity and by that she have to end her life.

### **The characters**

The main focus in this novel is Mrs. Edna Pontilier. As a round character, she changes the plot to be ironic with her decisions. She innocently believes society rules which stated that a married woman should behave as their husband social status and serve her husband and children. Actually, her husband not really chain her hand and her children not much fragile without her presence, however in the Grand Isle, she remember that inside herself, there is 'Edna' who needs to be love. When her eyes shut, she innocently does a routine duty without closely looking the reason of her behavior.

*"... she held up her hand, strong, shapely hand, and surveyed them critically, drawing up her sleeve above the wrist. Looking at them reminded her of her ring, which she had given to her husband without leaving for the beach. She silently reached out to him, and he, understanding took the ring from his pocket and dropped them into her open palm. She slipped them upon her fingers..." (Ch. 1)*

Her encounters with Adele, Robert, the sea and the awakening music awaken her actualization. She feel 'life' because her passion and freedom. Because of that when she have to her daily activity, her open eyes refuse to forgets the 'life' she ever have in Grand Isle. To Edna her children and home feel like an "alien world." Edna floats between delirium and

depression, applying herself to her painting at a manic rate. Then she visits Mademoiselle Reisz's apartment, where the pianist shares a letter from Robert and plays Robert's favorite Chopin piece. Edna sobs as she feels an awakening similar to that at Grand Isle. Her desire to feel 'life' brought her to her small house, Pigeon house, which she feels, a little bit freedom, away from neither her husband nor her children.

*"... I am tired looking after that big house. It never seemed like mine anyway - like home. It's too much trouble... the house, the money that provides for it are not mine... I have a little money of my own... I cannot judge myself, but I feel that I gained in ease and confidence... I know I shall like it, like the feeling of freedom and independence". (Ch. 26)*

Actually, it is natural for a woman, married or not, longing for appreciation, admiration, being needed, being loved and a freedom to express herself, it is a natural desire of every human being. Edna's husband and her children love her, however they and society not let her be an 'Edna'. For them she is a 'wife' and 'mother'. For Edna, she will live if she is able to do what she wants to do. She wants to live as an independent woman. Because being a passive woman is out of her characterization. It shows when she wants to live alone, work, play horse games, and moreover it showed from her appearance which is not like a common woman.

*"Her eyebrows were a shade darker than her hair. They were thick and almost horizontal, emphasizing the depth of her eyes. She was rather handsome than beautiful. Her face was captivating by reason of certain frankness of expression and a contradictory subtle play of features. Her manner was engaging". (ch. 2)*

From the above description, it can be assumed that with her background as a Creole and her masculine side, her attractiveness, and her strong will, once Edna fell into maturity and passion, she would struggle to maintain it. She felt no passion for neither her husband nor Armin, but she felt it for Robert, because of that when she was around him she felt life, that is why she is able to throw away her status as a wife and a mother. Not like any other woman, paradoxically, she wants to be free from any chains, including marriage. She matures enough to realize her consequences. That is why, when Robert proposes to her, she declines.

*"...through the daily treadmill of the life which has been portioned out to us... Gradually she begins to recognize and act upon her emerging feelings... blindly following whatever impulse moved her, as if she has placed herself in alien hands for direction, and freed her soul of responsibility..." (ch, 13)*

Edna loves no one except Robert, even her own children whose possess her very little love as a mother hood instinct. Because of that, Robert's goodbye notes blow out her strong wing, her stand vague, and it lead her to the Grand Isle, a special place who awakened her life's passion but in this place she also questioned her 'maturity' decision. Being innocent it means when a person without guilty, or naively, followed everything, like a norms, social standard, culture, common habits, etc. Because of they do not know the right or false, they unconsciously followed their destiny carried their life. In other words their consciousness of being 'life' entity is in 'death' state. In *the Awakening*, Edna tried to maintain her 'life' with keeping "Edna" conscious. She matures enough to understand her decision and it consequences. As long as Robert as her anchor keeps steady, her life passion would sail safely time after time. However he was gone, leave her drown in darkness of uncertainty, made her bad memory when she was innocently rapped in the water, do not know anything.

*" ... there was no human being whom she wanted near her except Robert; and she even realize that the day would come when he; too; and the thought of him would melt out of her existence, leaving her alone. The children appeared before her like antagonist who had overcome her; who overpowered her and drag her into the soul slavery for the rest of her days... She remembered the night she swam far out, and recalled the terror that seized her at the fear of being unable to regain the shore... her arms and legs are growing tired... exhaustion was pressing upon and overpowering her... she looked into the distance, and the old terror flamed up for an instant, then sank again...". (Ch. 39)*

Losing all her desires, it's means losing a life passion. She doesn't have any reason to fighting for. She gives up. There isn't any other way. She has to let destiny lead her life like her previous life when she innocently lead by society's chains. Even though she doesn't know the ending, she has to be freely surrendered to her fate, even death.

Mr. Pontilier also have important rule in *the Awakening*. Mr. Pontellier (Edna's husband) is not a hopeless boor whose nature would provide easy explanation and justification for his wife's rebellion. Rather he is portrayed as a thoroughly likable man of good nature and intention, successful in his business, popular with his peers, devoted to his wife and children. Though more than a little smug, he is immediately sensitive to the change taking place in his wife; and his concern is sympathetic enough to allow for his taking the advice of their old family doctor to ignore Edna's whims for a time in the hope that her curious mood will pass.

*“... looking at his wife as one looks at valuable piece of personal property which has suffered several damage...”. (Ch. 1)*

In spite of that fact, like a common British man at that time he also consider that his wife, his children and his belonging as his property. He valued, adored and love Edna as his wife not as a special woman named “Edna”. He is a good man, even after everyone suspect Edna affair he don’t blame her, he simply thought that it because a money matter, but he failed to understand the true reason behind his wife attitude.

### **The Symbols**

There are two crucial symbols in *The Awakening*, the sea and the bird, because both of them symbolize Edna life. The sea in the Grand Isle is the stand point of Edna maturity. In the first chapter showed Edna back from the sea with Robert, having sun burnt, until her husband claimed that she becomes unrecognizable. It implies that the sea, with it openness, nature and even the sun, being free to heat the earth, are able to make Edna realize that each human being has free choice, and she doesn’t has to be afraid of its consequences. Because of that his husband doesn’t understand with her new ‘life’ passion. When she was a little she can’t swim, she was afraid to be drawn. Her family educates her to become an honored woman, who always followed every society custom. She innocently doesn’t doubt her life until finally, her encounter with the sea awakened “Edna life”. When she finally able to swim, illustrate that she decide to be a brave woman who independent, thought and free.

*“But that night, 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. A feeling of exultation overtook her, as if some power of significant import had been given to her to control the working of her body and her soul. She grew daring and reckless, overestimating her strength. She wanted to swim far out, where no woman had swum before.” (ch. 10)*

*“...the voice of the sea is seductive, never ceasing, whispering, clamoring, murmuring, inviting to the soul to wonder in abysses of solitude...” (ch. 39)*

The description above emphasis the reason which makes Edna falls into maturity. Being a mature and have free passion is appetizing. Even there are many obstacles upon her path; she believes her passion, Robert, will straighten her up. When she finally found ‘Edna’ soul, she loses her destination. As the result she fall apart and she has to face her previous terror when

she was 'innocence'. Ultimately her destiny sunk into the sea abysses. To be purified as a newborn.

*"She looked into the distance, and the old terror flamed up her for an instant, then sank again..." (ch. 39)*

The birds as another major symbol appear from the beginning until the last chapter. The first bird is a green and yellow parrot that keeps singing over and over. The bird describe lives in a cage and able to speak Spanish an unknown language. It resemble Edna role as Mrs. Pontilier who always behave as a respected house wife even though she don't know the reason why she should do so. She can't lives freely and speaks up her own thought. Then the second bird is the pigeon, it is the name Edna new house, where she can afford the expense by herself and in that house she can be an independence woman. Like a pigeon who life freely and able to helps a human. Pigeon is the symbol of love and purity. In this phase, Edna receives love from Arobin and Robert. Being love is not committed doing a sin, fall in love is human nature, her love for Robert is pure without reason. Even society against this, but no one can be blame about it.

*"... a bird with a broken wing was beating the air above, reeling, fluttering, circling disable down, drown to the water". (ch. 39)*

That passage illustrates Edna condition. After losing her soul's anchor, her strong will fall apart. There is no one able to hold her steady. The bird foreshadowing Edna fate, which is tragically, sunk her into the abyss.

## 5. CONCLUSION

Chopin masterfully portrayed both the rise and eventual fall of a smart, romantic woman whose only desire was to live authentically, a desire thwarted by the traditional moral standards of her community. Moreover, she illustrated the devastating impact that society can have on a person, specifically Edna, who came to see death as a preferable alternative to existing in a society that harshly judged anyone who didn't mindlessly adhere to its customs and expectations.

After all, *the Awakening* emphasis the Edna tragic life has been played upside down by destiny. 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. This novel is neither about a woman who struggle to have a balance position in marriage institution nor about the reflection of author life but it is a beauty tale about the struggle journey of a woman named 'Edna' to found her happiness. In spite of many

obstacles she has to faced, she has to turn her innocence to become a mature woman. By bringing 'Edna' into a consciousness, she would awaken from her false life. Even though, ironically, in order to maintain her 'life' in the end she has to face 'death' but at least she had been tried to complete her journey to be an whole self. Moreover, sometimes a human have to do something unforgivable just to be able to go on living and find happiness.

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