

Nature's Solace

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Abstract

Ralph Waldo Emerson's ideals are grounded heavily around nature, as he was one of the founders of the transcendentalist movement. In my paper, I will be taking a look at Kate Chopin's 'The Awakening' and provide evidence that Emerson's ideas were driving forces behind the book's main character, Edna and the paths that she chose to take. Specifically that, once we are immersed in nature and become the 'transparent eye' we experience an awakening that forever changes us. For our character, we perceive this as they take a turn in their lives for one reason or another, and do not turn back. This awakening is something that many characters of the works they are in needed to experience to rid themselves of the worlds they were forced to take part in. One way or another.

A turning point is something integral to not only every story, but to every person's life. I would define a turning point as, the moment in a story where a critical decision or action must be taken, and once taken, there is no turning back. No matter the magnitude, every person, whether fictitious or not, will experience a turning point one way or another. Ralph Waldo Emerson experienced this turning point around the time of his most controversial essays, *Self-Reliance*. Emerson is one of the great essayists and philosophers of the 19th century. After establishing himself via his essays and other writing, he released what would ultimately tarnish his name and destroy him. Fully aware of what this would do to him Emerson trudged on and amidst the criticism he did not falter, as when you realize your genius there is nothing they can say or do to turn you back. His work sent waves throughout the proverbial world of literature. Emerson's influence can now be seen stretching the realms of every type of literature. From fiction to science fiction, the context of his words may have been different, but the principle remains the same, one cannot attain their true genius as long as they conform to the mannerisms of society. This will become apparent in Kate Chopin's work "The Awakening" as the main protagonist is living in a conformist's world. The observed parallel between characters that suffer oppression is they, by nature, should be able to coexist in their worlds, but thanks to society's artificial doctrines, they cannot. This will test her, pushing her towards her respective turning point, or "Awakening". In doing so, Edna will discover that, to truly achieve solace within herself, to truly attain enlightenment, there is no coexisting. She must perish.

Kate Chopin's Character Edna Pontellier, from her work "The Awakening", is in the midst of a crisis. She realizes that her life is not the life that she was meant to live. Chopin's Description of the character indicates that Edna is not like the women of her time, or at least warps the conception of what a "woman" is supposed to be. Chopin describes her as "rather handsome than beautiful"(16). The authors insight into the character reveals that this will not be a typical story and there will not be a typical protagonist. Edna is different, her features are almost derived from masculinity, this is revealing of the commentary Chopin is proposing to the reader; people do not fall into categories. A woman is not a woman and a man is not a man, there is no black and white when it comes to gender and identifying one's self. From the outside looking in, Edna has what some would call the "perfect" life. Edna is "happily" married to Leonce Pontellier -- a man living a "man's" life in the context of the late 19th, early 20th century -- with two children. Leonce's mindset is as expected of a man living at the time. "What folly! to bathe at such an hour in such heat!" exclaimed Mr. Pontellier. He himself had taken a plunge at daylight. That was why the morning seemed long to him. "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, 13). Living in Louisiana, Leonce's views are reflecting of the Napoleonic Code. A set of rules set in place during an era of strong male dominance in France. Heralded by Napoleon's jurists, the code was drafted and set in place by 1804(womeninworldhistory.com). Many of the codes properties still existed in Louisiana at the time. One of which being

that a wife's possessions were also her husbands, along with laws stating that divorce can only be requested if adultery was committed and the husband bring the adulterer into the household. This doctrine, with its misogynistic ideals played a big part in holding back the developing women in much of Europe and other parts of the world. Edna is subjected to her husband objectifying her and after realizing that she has committed her life to this man, begins to shift her disposition towards life. "He reproached his wife with her inattention, her habitual neglect of the children. If it was not a mother's place to look after children, whose on earth was it?"(Chopin 14) Edna was not a fan of this lifestyle. She loved her children but she didn't like them. Her inattention reveals how little she really yearned for this lifestyle, Edna yearned for something else. Also revealing, was Leonce's disposition toward his wife. He had no concern what mood she was in, only that she do what him along with the rest of society has expected of her to do; which is to stay at the house and cater to the family. Edna however would have no part in it. "Turning, she thrust her face, streaming 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." Immediately following the contempt and disapproval of her husband, Edna is fraught with emotion. Emotion that she has no idea why is overcoming her. Though early on in the novel, Chopin is already hinting at Edna's Awakening. Filled with emotion, Edna has no idea why she cries, but its easy to see that this isn't the life that she wanted. Though she may have it "made" with a husband who pays the bills and two children, this exhausts her and ultimately makes her unhappy. The inherent issue that this speaks to, is what

can a woman do in this situation? Even today, we as a society set placeholders for people to fall under and scoff at the idea of a mother leaving her husband to take care of children. A recent study from the us census reveals that there is a discrepancy ratio of about 5:1 when it comes to single mother households versus households headed by single fathers(census.gov). Currently there are ten million single mothers to about two million single fathers in America. This “phenomenon” comes from the idea that men have less responsibilities in the taking care of children in the literal sense. Money being provided does not equate to care being provided, something that the mother is looked upon to do. North America being such a heavily capitalistic society is to blame. There will always be bad with good. Money has become such a concern for so many that just because a father can provide their “support” via monetary methods, his actions are excusable. This is the kind of thing that Leonce for example could easily get away with, had he wanted to. Edna on the other hand, along with a myriad of other miserable women, would cause shame for doing the exact same thing. It’s a despicable double standard that still holds up in the modern world.

As a student of Emerson, Chopin alludes to Nature being a driving force, specifically the sea, throughout the entire novel. To understand this we have to understand Emerson’s ideals a little more thoroughly. “Self-reliance” being Emersons most controversial works, also was his genius. He bared all, and in doing so gave us one of the most compelling points about being human. “To believe your own thought, to

believe that what is true for you in your private heart is true for all men, -- that is genius. Speak your latent conviction, and it shall be the universal sense; for the inmost in due time becomes the outmost”(Emerson Self-reliance). The representation of the inmost and outmost is that the outmost is what we throw out as a facade to mask our true feelings. The inmost is the one that questions, the original being that has our true sense of individuality and genius. For many, the inmost can be consumed by the outmost, this is what happens to those who conform. They abandon any light that may have shined briefly from the inside. By speaking ones inner convictions one reveals their inmost to everyone, this is what Emerson goes on to reinforce. “I ought to go upright and vital, and speak the rude truth in all ways.”(Emerson Self-reliance) Genius is to not conceal anything, to reveal your inner self is to reveal your genius to the world, and if they don't like it, too bad. We catch a glimpse of Edna “revealing” herself to Robert Lebrun, the man whom she falls in love with in the story. “I suppose this is what you would call unwomanly; but I got into the habit of expressing myself.”(Chopin 277). As you can see Edna has accepted her inner self and revealed it to the world, this could very well be a bit of meta textualization from our author to Emerson.

Emerson believed that Nature is divine, and to appreciate Nature one must really embrace it by abandoning all current tasks along with society. He covers Nature from two points of view, the practical, and the philosophical. Emerson says “A man is fed, not that he may be fed, but that he may work,”(Emerson Nature) which goes to the more practical aspects of nature. The farther we remove ourselves from it the less we appreciate it and the less drive we have to. Emerson is really making the point that a

man would work to eat, and eat to work. They were a part of the cycle, they belonged. We are even furthermore removed from nature than Emerson ever believed his society was, which of course has to do in part to massive technological advances. Earlier in his essay he also states that "The sun illuminates only the eye of the man, but shines into the eye and the heart of the child". Children symbolize youth and purity, they are closer to nature because they have had less time to be tainted by society. The child-like state that both Chopin and Emerson refer to is a state where one is not only closer to Nature, they are questioning and revealing of their inner self. The tainting of society however may be a great indication of how our culture, America's culture, has so vastly changed since Emerson's era. In 2012, for every 100,000 people between the ages of 15 to 24 10.9% committed suicide. The progression, or regression of society in this light, reveals that children and young adults are committing suicide at an alarming rate, and why? Well it goes to Emerson's words in "Self-reliance", "There is a time in every man's education when he arrives at the conviction that envy is ignorance; that imitation is suicide"(Emerson, 2). Children are born into a world that is constantly trying to shape them. They are told what to wear, what to learn, what rules to abide by; they are told to conform. Many of us end up adapting to this, some of us however do not. Conforming to them is worse than death itself. There are children who prefer to dress in clothes from the opposite gender, when they are told that they cannot it confuses them. They suffer from an extreme identity crisis because they are told they do not belong. Their only escape from that life is suicide. This is why Edna has to perish. Edna is living in a world that is expecting something of her, and if she doesn't deliver, she will be

punished. Edna is not without fault, in fact it is her naivety that was the beginning of the end. It would be a child-like state that would make Edna, and ultimately end her.

Edna was quite Naive going into her relationship with Leonce. Chopin writes “Her marriage to Léonce Pontellier was purely an accident, in this respect resembling many other marriages which masquerade as the decrees of Fate. It was in the midst of her secret great passion that she met him. He fell in love, as men are in the habit of doing, and pressed his suit with an earnestness and an ardor which left nothing to be desired. He pleased her; his absolute devotion flattered her. She fancied there was a sympathy of thought and taste between them, in which fancy she was mistaken.”(Chopin 46) Passion and young love clouded Ednas judgment. She was indeed mistaken when she took Leonce as her husband and trapped herself at the ripe age of 28. For her to turn back after having two kids was preposterous, and turn back she would not. Edna’s development in the novel is quite extensive, we understand she is miserable, but she still seems a tad naive. Her pursuit of the turning point, this awakening, would thrust her into becoming more mature and enlightened by the end of the book.

Ednas path to climax opens up when she is met by a powerful force that is the sea.

“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...The voice of the sea is seductive; never ceasing, whispering, clamoring, murmuring, inviting the soul to wander for a spell in abysses of solitude; to lose itself in mazes of inward contemplation.

The voice of the sea speaks to the soul. The touch of the sea is sensuous, enfolding the body in its soft, close embrace.”(Chopin, 34)”

Edna does not know how to swim, after a visit to the beach however she is compelled to enter the sea and try. The sea’s voice figuratively called to her soul, and where does a soul reside? On the inside. The sea invited her to its “soft, close embrace” after which she begins her awakening. “Mrs. Pontellier was beginning to realize her position in the universe as a human being.” (Chopin, 34) Edna has an existential moment at this point, she begins to see that she is an individual, that she does not need to confine herself to such a life. Instantly the relation becomes apparent that Chopin finds nature to be a force that is very powerful and that can unlock ones mind. Emerson writes “When a man gazes at the stars, he becomes aware of his own separateness from the material world.”(Emerson Nature) This is exactly what Edna starts to experience, there is something essential to us all that nature calls to, yet we neglect it. Edna is unlocked, just like Emerson and Henry David Thoreau was. It is the solitude that is just as important. The seas vastness was enough to give Edna peace from the rest of the world so that she could be awakened. With-in the sea Edna found solitude. Though the awakening is a very relevant title, the original title of the

book was "The solitary soul" which truly give insight into the theme both Emerson and Chopin reinforce.

After the traumatic moment Edna experiences within the seas embrace she discovers herself and perseus her interest in painting. Her genius would be revealed via her art. This leads to her neglecting other "responsibilities" her husband has expected from her. "How does she act?" inquired the Doctor. "Well, it isn't easy to explain," said Mr. Pontellier, throwing himself back in his chair. "She lets the housekeeping go to the dickens."(Chopin 170) Leonce cannot comprehend the idea of his wife refusing to do the housekeeping to pursue a life in art. Again we can see how oppressive and subconsciously misogynistic Edna's husbands mindset can be. After some time, Edna had had enough. She ups and leaves what she had behind and to pursue a love that she had not felt for a long time, in which she finds in Robert Lebrun. It is after her experiences with Robert that she understands that she cannot exist within the constraints of this world. "There was no human being whom she wanted near her except Robert; and she even realized that the day would come when he, too, and the thought of him would melt out of her existence, leaving her alone."(Chopin, 302) Edna had been through this once before, After her experiences with Robert she understood that this male dominant world would not let her be free, ever. And like all the children after her who would experience similar adversities she understood what must happen. "She went on and on. 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. She did not look back now" Edna made up her mind, she hit her turning point and would not look back. Pushed and shoved by the laws constructed for this

matriarchal society she understood that she could have no part in, Edna knew. She must die.

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