Awakening against Society’s Traditions

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Abstract

In Kate Chopin’s “The Awakening”, the main character Edna Poniteller undergoes an awakening and sadly must die for doing so. Edna’s reasoning for her death comes from her changed life style, where she is going against what society expects of a woman and in most cases, women are treated as second class citizens When we compare how women were treated in the past versus present day, it is wrong for such treatment to happen but right and wrong are not dictated by virtues but rather the cultural rules set in place by the people before set what is correct or wrong. Another character known as Rowena Walden or Rena Warwick from Charles W. Chestnut’s “House behind the Cedars” also goes through an awakening and also has to die for doing so. Both these characters have gone against society’s expectations and while it should be applauded but they are rather women ahead of their times.

To accomplish my task of explaining my reasoning for both these character’s untimely deaths, I will be analyzing several texts such as “The Awakening” and “House behind the Cedars”, historical context within each book and other scholarly articles to explain and strengthen my reasoning. At the end of the essay, I hope you the reader will understand the difficulty in choosing to be the non-conformist and if you wish to continue in this path; you must truly be one that dares, defies and must not back down.

“For nonconformity the world whips you its displeasure…” (Emerson para 11)

For a woman born in the late 1899, she had a certain set of duties that were expected of them to know, learn and do. They were responsible for birthing children, taking care of them, taking care of their family, obeying their husband or father, whoever the male authority was at that time and most importantly, being a wife and mother. They were treated as second class citizens in most parts, they couldn’t own property and had their lives based around their husbands and never were able to leave that type of life. Compared to men, women had no life and had to live beneath men and as their shadows; such is society’s expectations of women.

Edna Poniteller grew up living in this society and their expectations of being a mother and a wife, she must tend to her children, take care of the family and make them dinner every night, but she was “… rather handsome than beautiful…” (Chopin 8), not a womanly person by her looks and her movements were the same as well “Her manner was engaging” (Chopin 8). She has qualities that resemble a man than a woman, and her beauty is not something that can be made quickly from a glance but a second glance. “In short, Mrs. Poniteller was not a womanly woman” (Chopin 12). She is not womanly and despite her expectations of being a mother she does not take care of the children instead having their nurse take care in watching over them.

Edna did not marry her husband Leon Poniteller out of passion or love, but for two reasons; “Her marriage to Leon was purely an accident, in this respect resembling many other marriages which masquerade as the decrees of Fate” (Chopin 22). The 2nd reason was purely out of spite against “..violent oppression of her father and sister Margaret to her marriage with a Catholic, and we need seek no further for the motives which led her to accept Monsieur Pointeller for her husband.”(Chopin 22). She is unhappy with her life, her husband does not care about how she is feeling and Edna would often cry herself to sleep. She did not hate her husband but there was a lack of passion in their relationship, “She grew fond of her husband, realizing with some unaccountable satisfaction that no trace of passion or excessive and fictitious warmth colored her affected...” (Chopin 23) She dreams of an old crush and one where she felt passion towards, and often she “..sometimes picked it up and kissed the cold glass passionately”(Chopin 22). This was against how society’s expectations of how women must be, she had to love her husband and her children; the two things that defined a woman during this time period. Even more, she dreams of an old love and that would create some issue with the husband as it is required for the wife to love their husband unconditionally.

Her female friend Adele Ratignolle is the ideal image of a woman that fulfills the standard that society expects out of a woman. She loves her family and her husband, and talks about having more children. When it came to the topic over children, Edna says “I would give up the unessential; I would give my money, I would give my life for my children; but I wouldn’t give myself.”(Chopin 52). Society at this time expected women to love their children and to devote their entire time to raising these munchkins. “..And one might say motherhood is what she was fated for.”(Kaplon para. 5)

Edna has another friend, Mademoiselle Reisz, who she meets during the vacation.Reisz represents someone who has chosen to not follow tradition, choosing not to marry and became a pianist. “Mademoiselle Reisz is a woman devoid of motherly tendencies and sexuality. She is physically unappealing and seems to have no romantic past, present or future” (Kaplon para. 8). She is like an exile, she

At this point, we can see the buildup for Edna’s unhappiness of being a mother and a wife. She does not care much about her husband, she is unhappy with how she is treated by him and does not love him as much. For her children, “She was fond of her children in an uneven, impulsive way. She would sometimes gather them passionately to her heart; she would sometimes forget them” (Chopin 23). She does not worry about her children and as the quote before says, she wouldn’t give them herself to them meaning she wouldn’t give change her life to make them the number one of her life and devote all time to her children. Her feelings is not what you expect from a woman who must live for her husband and her children, she is not abandoning her children and her husband; at least not yet.

When the story begins, Edna is with her family at a vacation house near a beach. It is during this vacation that she approaches her beginning of her own awakening; this is especially important since it would begin her eventual path towards her demise. “A certain light was beginning to dawn within her, - the light which showing the way, forbids it” (Chopin 17). Following the vacation, Edna soon collapses at their daily Sunday church meeting,”... feeling of oppression and drowsiness overcame Edna during the service.”(Chopin 40). She is taken to a woman by the name of Madame Antonie with the help of a young friend named Robert. While she is resting she starts to notice who she is, her shape and texture of her body parts and furthers her awakening. Soon she hears news that Robert has to leave for Mexico and she is heartbroken upon hearing it. “For the first time she recognized the symptoms of infatuation which she had felt incipiently as a child, as a girl in her earliest teens, and later as a young woman.” (Chopin 50).

Later during the story, she starts to be more independent and going against society’s expectations. The first happened during one night where Edna wanted to watch the night sky outside her house, her husband did not approve and demanded her to go sleep. During this time period, such an action was not good. Women were expected to listen and follow whatever the husband said. “Another time she would have gone at his request. She would, through habit, have yielded to his desire; not with any sense of submission or obedience to his compelling wishes, but unthinkingly,… thought the daily treadmill of the life which has been portioned out to us” (Chopin 35). She was willing to stand against what was expected for her to do and see who would give up first, her will to no longer follow what was expected of her, or her husband who wanted follow tradition. The second one happened when she was alone in the house and wanted to crush her wedding ring, to remove the thing that traditionally binds her to her relationship with her husband. “..Taking off her wedding ring, flung it upon the carpet. When she saw it lying there, she stamped her hell upon it, striving to crush it. But her small boot heel did not make an indenture, not a mark upon the little glittering circlet.” (Chopin 57). She was unable to break it which is a metaphor to how strong the bond of marriage can be, in this case it is not a good thing.

Edna soon begins to take up painting, and visits Mademoiselle Resiz to talk about painting and being an artistic person. Resiz points out her talent and wishes for her to continue being an artistic person. Resiz gives Edna some advice for her if she chooses to continue her artistic pursuit, “The artist must possess the courageous soul…The soul that dares and defies” (Chopin 68). Edna had been daring and defying, choosing to pick up painting, going against her husband’s wishes to the point where he consulted a doctor to see if Edna is sick, but if she wishes to continue living this life style, she must be ready to go against society’s traditions and not back down; to cultivate this idea, she begins to read Emerson.

Edna did face resistance by her husband, she had recently purchased a house to move into and continue her practice of painting. “It seems to me the utmost folly for a woman at the head of a household, and the mother of children, to spend in an atelier days which would be better employed contriving for the comfort of her family” (Chopin 62). Leon does not believe she should be painting, “... but don’t let the family go to the Devil” (Chopin 62), and believes she should be spending more time taking care of the family. Edna still is not backing down, choosing to follow what she believes and not go along with what tradition and society says to do.

Edna soon starts experiencing moments of independence, which was not something that happened to women during this time period. She begins to go to the racetrack by herself to earn some money by betting and also sells her paintings to people. With all this newfound money, she also begins to make preparations to move to a new house away from her old house. It is rare for women to earn money let alone have control over it since the husbands were the ones who handled the money. “…Gambling at the racetrack and beginning to sell her paintings” (Kaplon para. 14). Women in these terms were never allowed to take jobs or work outside of their home and the money earned did not reach their hands, instead it went to their husbands. This is a step forward into her step forward to go with what she wanted to do, and against society’s traditions and expectations.

Edna meets a man by the name of Alcee Arobin at the racetracks and they strike up a conversation and soon she is visited by him and some other folks that Edna has met through her time in her own house being a painter while her children and husband were elsewhere. She soon begins an affair with Arobin after a small conversation at her home, despite all this time her feelings for Robert but she still wrote letters to her husband, who was on a business trip in New York. “When he leaned forward and kissed her, she clasped his head, holding his lips to hers. It was her first kiss of her life to which her nature had really responded. It was a flaming torch that kindled desire” (Chopin 88). She had kissed another man other than her husband, she had committed an affair but she felt passion and bought back an awakening, a sexual awakening. She has gone through her sexual awakening, she has realized what her body wants sexually and she is happy for one to fulfill these desires for the first time in her life ever since she got married. She has committed adultery and it is unacceptable, especially in society’s expectations. Women were expected to only be sleeping with their husbands, even if said husbands were sleeping with their mistress on the side. Society cannot accept such transgressions.

Despite her initial feelings for her children, she starts carving to hold her children and see them. This is in a way, an attempt to push her back into the tradition and expectations that is given to Edna. “Nature reminds Edna of her position as a mother by making her crave her children’s presence periodically” (Kaplon para. 16). She does travel to the caretakers of the children after moving into her new house, and visits them but she does not stay for long and does not think of Leon. She has come to be like a mother to her children but does not take them home and continue taking care of them because she does not want to back down from her path.

During a trip to Mademoiselle Resiz’s house she finds out that Robert has come back when they see each other, and Edna was very excited upon seeing him. “She always fancied him expressing or betraying his love for her” (Chopin 103). Her chance to catch up with Robert over dinner at her house is interrupted by Arobin who came over to see Edna and this action forces Robert to leave after introducing himself to Arobin. Edna forces Arobin to go away and stays up dreaming about Robert. “A vision- a transcendently seductive vision of a Mexican girl arose before her. She writhed with a jealous pang. She wondered when he would come back.” (Chopin 108). She starts to become jealous at the thought of another woman catching Robert’s eyes, signs of a woman infatuated with another man. She is quickly forgetting her place in society, Leon Poniteller’s wife and this is going against how society’s expectations.

“…Because you were not free; you were Leonce Pontellier’s wife.”(Chopin 112). “I am no longer one of Mr. Pontellier’s possessions to dispose of or not. I give myself where I choose.” (Chopin 113). The conversation between Robert and Edna informs the reader of how different these two people think despite being in love. Robert does not wish to pursue Edna because of tradition’s rules that a wife and husband must be joined until death in matrimony but Edna does not believe this, she says she is free and if she chooses to be Robert’s lover she wants it to happen. Robert chose to keep to society’s traditions while Edna continues to go against society even outright admitting that she has the ability to choose her own lover and not feel like she belongs to someone. It is due to this conflict that Robert leaves Edna after she visits Adele Ratignolle, and leaves Edna heartbroken. She can’t bring herself to see Arobin nor her husband because it would mean she has to go back to her old lifestyle, one filled with boredom and lack of passion. She decides that she must move forward, and she does so by going swimming.”She did not look back now, but went on and on, thinking of the blue-grass meadow that she had traversed when a little child, believing that it had no beginning and no end.”(Chopin 121). In defiance against society, if she must be forced back into being Arobin or Leonce’s possession she would rather die and continues swimming until she grew tired and soon drowns.

When you live in a human society, there are certain rules and traditions that are set in place; sometimes subtle and sometimes in plain sight, but to go against these rules and traditions you incur the wrath of it. Edna being unhappy as she was with her life living under the thumb of these rules and traditions chooses to take a new lifestyle and awakens with a new thought, a lifestyle where she is not forced to be another person’s wife or mother. However as she tries to fulfill this lifestyle, she realizes it is difficult and to continue this journey she must resist any chance of going back into the lifestyle and towards the middle of the book she starts to be accustomed to her life. When she meets Arobin and goes through an affair with him, she dictates how the relation between the two of them goes and when she sees Robert again, she makes it clear with Robert that she is an individual and not someone’s object to claim. Yet these strong claims for Edna to make ends up backfire as it is the reason that Robert leaves her. Edna is quite aggressive to achieve her goals and being against society’s expectations and rules, but there is another character who also goes through an awakening and her approach is very different than Edna’s

In the book “The House Behind the Cedars”, Rena Walden or Rena Warwick goes through an awakening of her own but unlike Edna’s awakening, her awakening has more to do with race rather than gender and the conflict within the story also has to do with race. Rena and her brother John Warwick are mulattos, people with black and white ancestry who come into conflict with either passing as a white person or live as a black person. Like all people who go through an awakening, they must die. They have violated a tradition or rule that society demands it must be in place and because they stand alone they are fated to either die or go back to their own lives.

When the story begins, John Warwick is introduced first and we learn that he has come back to his hometown and wants to bring his sister Rena with him to take care of his son after his wife died. Since he hasn’t been back in his hometown for the past ten years because he had moved northward to become a white lawyer, he tries to see if the townsfolk remember him, see if he is seen as a white person and to find out what his sister looks like. He returns to his mother’s house and even she does not recognize her own son’s face which is an indication of John’s successful passing as a white man. At this point, Rena is introduced and she is revealed to be an extremely pretty woman which prompts John to subtly tempt Rena to come live with him.

While their mother is reluctant to send Rena away, she does give in and permits Rena to live with John. ““she may go,” replied the mother brokenly. “I’ll not stand in her way –I’ve got sins enough to answer for already.”” The mother feels that if she allows Rena to live as a white woman she could make up for her sins; the sins of entering a relationship with a white man. She feels like it is a sin because her black ancestry will prevent Rena from enjoying a happy life, a terrible thought since black people during this time period of the south could not get far in life, so even at the expense of being lonely she feels it is necessary for Rena to pass as a white woman.

After Rena arrives at John’s mansion she goes through school in order to learn how to act like a lady, important since if she must pass she must also learn how to act like them. After some time they visit a tournament ball where men are dressed up as knight to participate in a jousting competition. Rena accidently drops her handkerchief which is caught by one of the knights who is revealed later on to be John’s friend, George Tyron. George wins the tournament and thanks Rena as his good luck charm, which later prompts a romance between the two. However Rena fears that their secret will get out and will make George leave her since he is a white and would not accept Rena passing as a white woman. ““Would he have loved me at all, “she asked herself, “If he had known the story of my past? Or, having loved me, could he blame me now for what I cannot help?” “(Chesnutt 57). John goes to talk to George to see if he would leave her, and George gives him his word that he would not leave Rena no matter the circumstance.

Afterwards Rena get dreams that her mother is sick and dying soon, and while John attempts to put her at ease; a letter arrives telling Rena that her mom is in fact in poor health. Rena writes to George that she will be going somewhere but did not detail where. To make matters worse, George has to go to Patesville for legal issues and Patesville is where Rena’s mother lives. It is there that Rena is revealed to have black ancestry which drives George to feel ashamed and break relations with her but he promises to keep the secret to himself. If there ever was a good reason as to why Rena was not successful at passing, it is because she attempts to return to her past. “‘Let the dead past bury its dead ‘“(Chesnutt 61). She attempts to jump between the two worlds she is a part of, the white life and the black life. She cannot do this, society must have you belong to one world either the black world or the white world. John was able to pass because he stayed in one of the two worlds he used to belong, for ten years John did not visit his mother and sister at all and when he did visit just to bring his sister to this new world, he was a buried dead, he kept his past buried deep, deeper than six feet.

After Rena was heartbroken by George’s actions, she returns back to Patesville and into her mother’s house. This was where Rena goes through her awakening and it is a long description, “…her sympathies, broadened by culture and still more by her recent emotional experience, did not shrink…She had been taught to despise them because they were not so white as she was, and had been slaves while she was free. Her life in her brother’s home, by removing her from immediate contact with them, had given her a different point of view…With her quickened intelligence she could perceive how great was their need and how small their opportunity; and with this illumination came the desire to contribute to their help”(Chesnutt 144). She now instead of going back to the old life she had tried to bury in order to go into the white life, she now has the desire to help the black people who have been put in a great disadvantage because of recent events. She no longer want to shame them but help them so they would not be living a terrible life where opportunities are taken away from them at birth. Now this does not bode well with society right now, especially since mostly white men are in power. They do not wish to see a race that they consider beneath them to rise up and become as strong as they are or even more.

Rena does fulfill her desire to teach when her mom’s second cousin introduces another cousin of hers called Jeff Wain who owns a school, all the mean while the mother is still trying to marry off Rena. The two of them are invited to a party where only mulattos were accepted, Rena’s old childhood friend Frank was denied entrance because his skin tone was darker than theirs. This was Rena’s second mistake, she keeps jumping between worlds, and living her life first as a black woman, later as a white woman and now being a mulatto. She has to stick to one society and one world, society cannot allow someone to jump through worlds, and they must stick to one.

Rena soon dies after being chased by Jeff Wain and George Tryon, both men who have fallen in deep love for Rena but it is assumed that they seek her to commit wrong doing. She tries to escape their reach but gets lost in the forest and is saved by Frank, who represents the old life that she had left behind. The real society and world she should have lived under and punished for trying to escape it by society itself.

Both Edna and Rena went through awakenings during the course of the story and were punished and died after doing so. “Right and wrong must be eternal verities, but our stands for measuring them vary with our latitude and our epoch. We make our customs lightly; once made, like our sins, they grip us in bands of steel.” (Chesnutt 28). It should not be wrong for a woman to become more than simply a possession of someone and should not be wrong for Rena to live in a white life, but our customs and traditions despite bringing people together also bring people down. Although their actions and thoughts were ahead of its time, they stood alone and society easily killed Edna and Rena off and society continues onward.

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