Death as Self-Reliance: The Expression of Female Independence and Autonomy Through Life in Death in Kate Chopin’s *The Awakening*

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**Abstract**

The paper will examine the life and death of Edna Pontellier, the main protagonist Kate Chopin’s, *The Awakening*. Alone with that, Edna’s strong will, independence and self-reliance as a woman and her expressions of these traits through her life and her death. During a time period when women were expected to be docile and subservient, and authors were pressured to portray women as such, examining strong and independent women in literature is important in showing the growth of feminism and the existence of female strength and independence throughout all of history. The paper will scrutinize Edna’s personal relationships with her husband, the circumstances surrounding her death, as well as a number of secondary sources examining the novel. While on the surface it may seem that Edna’s death is a surrender, on a deeper level her death is an incredible demonstration of independence and what Ralph Waldo Emerson would call “self-reliance.”

In Kate Chopin’s *The Awakening*,the main character of Edna Pontellier is a strong and independent woman who refuses to accept her determined female role in a male-dominated society. The story takes place during the nineteenth century, where women are treated like property and are subject to the whims and interests of their husbands. Edna’s entire life, including her tragic death, is filled with this constant struggle between her strong will and the oppressive social norms to which she chooses not to adhere. Edna Pontellier demonstrates Emerson’s self-reliance both through her life and through her death. She exhibits self-reliance through her life by being a headstrong woman refuses to become the physical and emotional possession of both her husband and the man she loves. She chooses solitude rather than accept a relationship with Robert on terms that do not suit her.

While Edna’s death on the surface the result of Robert leaving her, on a deeper level it is her exertion of her own will over her life. By giving herself over to the ocean, she makes a conscious decision that no one but she will have authority over her life, and her death. As a woman in the late nineteenth century American South, Edna must adhere to certain expectations of how to be a proper wife and mother. Edna, however, desires to live her own life and pursue her own interests, while she calls marriage the most lamentable experience. She does not wish to be the property either of her husband or even her own children. “Edna is being asked to conform, but she was always different” (Williams). In many ways, Edna’s suicide results from social pressure and the “awakening” of her strength and individualism as both a woman and as a individual. Because her decision to take her own life comes almost immediately after her romantic interest Robert’s decision to leave, it is easy to see it as just another surrender to the whims of a man in her life. In reality, Edna’s death, just like her life, was an expression of her strong will and an unwillingness to let anyone else control or own her. Edna’s constant emotional struggle to trust her own desires and not be overcome by the strict and oppressive societal standards of her culture is the epitome of what Ralph Waldo Emerson calls “genius” and “self-reliance.”

Edna Pontellier refuses to accept her societally determined role as a mother. While she is a mother of two children, and loves them strongly, she refuses to allow motherhood become her only reason for living on this planet. Chopin describes Edna’s loving yet passive attitude toward 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). A little later, after describing how Edna’s two boys had spent a portion of the previous summer with their grandmother, Chopin continues: “Their absence was a sort of relief, though she did not admit this, even to herself. It seemed to free her of a responsibility which she had blindly assumed and for which Fate had not fitted her” (Chopin 24). In perhaps one of the most telling scenes regarding motherhood in the entire work, Edna tells her friend, Madame Ratignolle, what she would and would not sacrifice for her children: “‘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 more clear; it’s only something which I am beginning to comprehend, which is revealing itself to me’” (Chopin 57).

Edna’s refusal to take a role of mother and wife becomes a big issue to her husband. “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 9). At that time attitudes toward motherhood were shaped by society where women were mothers and wives before individuals. As Dyer notes, “the nineteenth century’s message of the supremacy of motherhood was so strong and so intense that it was absorbed into the systems of its women—even women like Edna who were not maternally inclined.” Even Edna’s friend does not quite understand her bias against motherhood. When trying to explain her indifference toward marriage and motherhood to Madame Ratignolle, the two women have a “heated argument” about it and do not seem to understand each other (Chopin 57). Clearly, if Edna would exist in today’s world, she would meet disapproving attitudes toward her as well as she did in the book.. Even today, society favors women such as Madame Ratignole, who would put their family’s interests before their own.

Yet despite pressures from her friends, her husband and society , Edna Pontellier refuses to surrender to the role that she is expected to fulfill. She is a mother, but she is her own person first. She has her own passions, interests and desires. She enjoys painting and is incredibly emotional about piano music. Edna loves her children but she refuses to let motherhood to be the defining role in her life.

Author’s own fate has a great resemblance with Edna’s. Being an Emersonian scholar, Chopin follows her own genius and creates a woman “who doesn't need a man” (Williams). The consequences for Chopin were what Emerson would call a “sour face” of society. Kate Chopin’s declaration was “Perhaps it is better to wake up after all, even to suffer; than to remain a dupe to illusions all one’s life”. ([loyno.edu](http://loyno.edu)). It is very easy to see why Kate Chopin’s career was destroyed by resentful society after she wrote *Awakening. “*Society thinks that Chopin made it ugly to be a woman, even feminist writers said that she went too far” (Williams). For many women Chopin’s story would represent a motivating force for self -reliance and individuality which are not acceptable in the men’s world till this day.

Edna exemplify self-reliance by refusing to accept her determined by society duties as a wife. In Chopin’s society, women had specific roles and responsibilities not just as mothers, but as wives as well. While these included a number of actual physical duties, the main duty was to be adherent and subservient to her husband. In Edna’s case, her society, her husband and even her own father expects her to meet certain guidelines as a devoted wife. From the first interaction of Mr. Pontellier and Edna, Chopin sets up Mr. Pontellier as a man who thinks he owns his wife. After scolding Edna for being out on the beach during the hottest part of the day and getting burnt, Chopin notes that Mr. Pontellier looked at his wife “as one looks at a valuable piece of personal property which has suffered some damage” (5). Chopin goes on to describe Mr. Pontellier as someone who believes proper wives have certain responsibilities to their husbands and their households. “Mr. Pontellier had been a rather courteous husband so long as he met a certain tacit submissiveness in his wife. But her new and unexpected line of conduct completely bewildered him. It shocked him. Then her absolute disregard for her duties as a wife angered him” (68). One of the greatest statements of Ralph Waldo Emerson : “For non-conformity wold whips you with displeasure” (Emerson, para 12). Later, when Mr. Pontellier attempts to get advice from a doctor regarding his wife’s “odd” behavior, his first description of it to the doctor is that “she lets the housekeeping go to the dickens’” (Chopin 78).

Even Edna’s own father has certain expectations regarding how a woman is supposed to act and conduct herself as a good wife. When Edna refuses to attend her sister’s wedding, her father says: “‘You are too lenient, too lenient by far, Léonce…Authority, coercion are what is needed. Put your foot down good and hard; the only way to manage a wife. Take my word for it’” (Chopin 86). That only shows that social norms so strong that a father is willing to support the subjugation of his own daughter. Yet despite such oppressive and restrictive enviroment, Edna refuses to become the obedient wife. In fact, the more Mr. Pontellier attempts to push his authority over Edna, the more Edna pushes back. “When Mr. Pontellier became rude, Edna grew insolent. She had resolved never to take another step backward” (Chopin 68). As evidence of this, she completely abandons her Tuesday receptions, does not return the visits of those who call on her and refuses to conduct her household duties (Chopin 68). To her, following her own path and being her own person, is more important than doing what everyone around her tells her.

Edna Pontellier demonstrates individualism and the strength of her will is through her interactions with Robert Lebrun . It is clear that Edna loves him. Yet even despite her love for Robert, and his love back for her, Edna refuses to allow that love to consume her and give herself over to the men of her dream entirely. Despite her desire for him both physically and emotionally, Edna retains her own autonomy and the significance of being her own woman even with him. When Robert implies that Edna belongs to her husband who must either release or not release her from the marriage, Edna does not take too happily his proposition and answers:

“You have been a very, very foolish boy, wasting your time dreaming of impossible things when you speak of Mr. Pontellier setting me free! I am no longer one of Mr. Pontellier’s possessions to dispose of or not. I give myself where I choose. If he were to say, ‘Here, Robert, take her and be happy; she is yours,’ I should laugh at you both” (Chopin 129).

This exchange shows that Edna’s sense of independence and self-reliance is exhibited even in her relationship with man she loves. She is a woman who is longing for the love of her life but, even then, nothing goes before being her own woman who controls her own being. Even love with Robert must be on Edna’s terms and not anybody else’s.

Yet another way in which Edna Pontellier expresses independence, autonomy and self-reliance is through her death. On the surface, Edna’s suicide appears to be the epitome of being controlled by a man. After all, the event that almost directly leads to her suicide is the goodbye note from Robert (Chopin 134). In a way, taking own life over another person’s decision demonstrates powerlessness and surrender of control. However, exploring in depth Edna’s suicide, we see that just like her life, her death was also a powerful expression of autonomy and personal will. Throughout her life Edna makes decisions based on her own needs rather than societal pressures and expectations. Choosing the time and manner of her death, rather than dying on terms that are not her own, is the final statement to the world that no one is control of Edna’s mind, body and soul but she.

While Robert’s note might seem like a reason that moves Edna to take her own life, her emotional conflict inside does not revolve around this man. Her despair grows with a hopelessness she begins to feel and the desire to set herself free from being possessed . “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 136). Later, Chopin continues: “She thought of Léonce and the children. They were a part of her life. But they need not have thought that they could possess her, body and soul” (137). These are the real reasons for Edna’s pain and her decision to take her own life. Her pain is not because of a disappeared lover or not returned affection; it is that of a woman who sees death on her own terms as preferable to life as a physical and spiritual possession of others.

The ocean is an incredibly powerful symbol in the novel. It is not only a symbol of death as a place where Edna meets her final end, but a symbol of life as a place where life on the planet starts. As Dyer claims:

It is no small coincidence that a novel about the birth of the self ends with a woman returning to the sea, the source of life, of beginnings, nor that this return is coupled with images of childhood and early memories, emphasizing her return to the important beginnings of self-understanding (114).

The ocean is also a place where Edna has her first awakening experience. It fills her with a feeling of confidence and joy. She enters the ocean and for the first time realizes she can swim. “She embraces the water and returns to her childlike power” (Williams). The endlessness and beauty of the ocean help Edna to find an inner peace within herself.

She would not join the groups in their sports and bouts, but intoxicated with her newly conquered power, she swam out alone. She turned her face seaward to gather in an impression of space and solitude, which the vast expanse of water, meeting and melting with the moonlit sky, conveyed to her excited fancy. As she swam she seemed to be reaching out for the unlimited in which to lose herself (Chopin 34).

Since ocean is symbolizes a life giving power, it is easy to see how Edna’s suicide is not a death but a rebirth of a free woman.

Edna’s individualism symbolic of Emerson’s ideal of self-reliance is by following Emerson’s believe of “trust thyself.” According to Galens, Smith and Thomason, one of the foundations of Emerson’s philosophy is that each individual possesses a unique genius that “can only be revealed when that individual has the courage to trust his or her own thoughts, attitudes, and inclinations against all public disapproval.” As previously discussed, this is the main feature of Edna’s personality. “When genius calls, you should listen” (Williams). She is determined to live her life and pursue her individual whims and desires even in the face of what society expects of her as a mother and a wife. As Nigro notes, just as Emerson proposes in *Self-Reliance*, that Edna is “learning, as well as a woman of her society can, to live ‘wholly from within’” (96).

Emerson’s self-reliance is shown by Edna embracing solitude. According to Dyer, Emerson understood the essential role that solitude plays in achieving self-reliance (108). To emphasize this point Dyer cites Emerson: “‘The great man is he who in the midst of the crowd keeps with perfect sweetness the independence of solitude’” (108). When she finally decides to take her own life, she goes to the one place where she could experience true solitude and peace, and never take a step back. “The voice of the sea is seductive, never ceasing, whispering, clamoring, murmuring, inviting the soul to wander in abysses of solitude” (137). In her final act of self-determination and defiance, Edna finally embraces the solitude that is a key to Emerson’s idea of self-reliance. “She gave herself to ocean because she realized she will always be possessed by man” (Williams).

At those times women were not the only ones subjected to oppression. Author Charles Chestnut exhibits an example of a black male writer who struggles in a white male dominated society. Initially, his career path was becoming promising, but it experiences total fiasco later, after he wrote *The* *Marrow of Tradition.* This novel was written based on the true events that went on in Wilmington, and exhibited cruelty of a white man, who dominated in society at that time. Both Kate Chopin’s and Charles Chestnut’s literary paths were destroyed. Both writers created heroines who had to die because of being subjugated in a man’s world. Rena, a main character in Chestnut’s story, *House Behind a Cedars* dies because she makes a choice to go backward after she attempts to live a life full of opportunities. Contrary Edna dies because she wishes to move forward and declines to take a step back. The character of Chestnut’s novel *The House Behind a Cedars,* Rena’s brother John Warwick’s success in passing exemplifies a privilege of male , because in fact, John is actually able to move on and continues living his life after his secret is revealed. Ironically, author of *The Awakening,* Kate Chopin was a woman and author of *The Marrow of Tradition* Charles Chestnut was a black man, which draws us to conclude who was a responsible party for ruining writing career of those great novelists.

Edna Pontellier, rather misunderstood anti-hero, she appears in the story as quite dramatic, egoistic woman and misshaped mother. But regardless of her imperfections she was an inspiration to women who no longer just wanted to be mothers and wives, but human beings with unique and individual interests, needs and desires. Despite many of her flaws, Edna’s life and death exemplify a strength and individualism that is very imperative for survival of feminism.

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