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### The Making of a Survivor: Chopin's Use of Identity and Rebirth in The Awakening

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Suicide is a complex topic to broach in any setting. Very few people want to discuss the reasonings for ending one's life, especially when they have to agree or disagree with the motive. Literary suicide is an entirely different situation—if a character ends themselves, it is generally for a narrative or thematic purpose. It has to be approached from an alternate perspective. Yet what happens when a suicide is not explicitly depicted, yet scholars seem to believe it happens off the page? What if that conclusion does not feel like an accurate portrayal of the supposedly dead character? Contrary to popular scholarly belief, Edna Pontellier does not commit suicide after the conclusion of *The Awakening*; her development as an individual and exploration of identity make death counterintuitive, and Edna is not a tragically ending character.

After reaching the novel's conclusion, many scholars interpret the final pages as a prelude to suicide due to societal pressures both within and without the novel. According to an article by Peter Ramos, Edna was a morally incorrect character in the eyes of the audiences that were reading the novel; they would have wanted Edna to be punished, and so, from Ramos' perspective, Chopin succumbed to their whims and implied a suicide (Ramos 146). Female gender roles and expectations at the time when *The Awakening* was written were more conservative and submissive than how Chopin depicts Edna. As such, it seems logical to assume that Chopin wanted her novel to sell and thus wrote an ending that satisfies the masses while still allowing her to convey the story she desires. However, this is a compromised argument. The ending of a novel is meant to tie up all previous events and messages. For Chopin to sacrifice a clearly delineated ending defeats the purpose of writing *The Awakening*. The narrative would fall flat if this is the case. Others argue that Edna's suicide is logical because it is her only method of escape from the suffocating rules of the patriarchy. Mary Cuff postulates that, by dying, Edna undermines the patriarchal society holding her back—the society she cannot control or destroy,

thus leaving her with few options for escape (Cuff 328). On the surface, this seems a reasonable conclusion. Yet Cuff ignores a third possible option for escape: reimagining an individual's role. The novel, in its entirety, follows Edna's discovery and growth of the self; dying defeats the purpose of that development. Reinventing her place in society is a triumphant ending for Edna, making room for her new sense of self without compromising her character's integrity. Societal pressures primarily drive scholarly analyses toward suicide, though it is not the only reason Edna's story is viewed as tragic.

There is a separate collection of reasonings in favor of Edna's suicide that derive their conclusions from Edna's sense of identity. In her article "The Bird That Came out of the Cage," Clark explains that suicide boldly indicates Edna is entirely unwilling to give up any amount of the freedom she desires, like a bird observing their old cage and refusing to take a new one (Clark 344, 345). Clark views the possibility of suicide as the closing statement on Edna's growth as an individual when, in fact, this is contradictory to the idea of developing individuality. Death is not the ultimate growth stage; it is giving up when the situation becomes complicated. Ivy Schweitzer's article takes a darker stance by claiming that Edna "does not feel she possesses herself" (Schweitzer 163). This older reading of the novel contradicts some newer ideas of Edna's accepting perception of herself. However, it essentially goes against Edna's recognition that she could not be possessed by anyone, not even her husband, lover, or children (Chopin 167, 176). If no one outside of Edna possesses her (at least from her perspective), then she is, by definition, a free woman. The only person who can lay claim to Edna Pontellier is Edna herself, which she acknowledges, and this ultimately refutes the theory that Edna commits suicide from a lack of autonomy. Identity does play a role in readings that explicate suicide, but it can also be used to prove her survival.

Before an accurate conclusion about the novel's ending can be made, it is vital to understand how scholarly and textual definitions of identity have evolved regarding *The Awakening*. Schweitzer's article discusses a previous belief that the identity of motherhood is separate from that of being an individual (Schweitzer 162). This is not as widely accepted as it was in the past, mostly due to further examinations of specific passages. One such example is when Edna has moved into her pigeon house, living as an individual while still loving and caring for her children, who are staying with their grandmother (Chopin 151). This break away from conventional society gives Edna a chance to find the balance between motherhood and selfhood, in that she can temporarily give her entire being to her children before returning to the comfort of her semi-solitary existence. Schweitzer also has the idea that one's sense of identity is intrinsically bound by contradictions of freedom and desiring another man (Schweitzer 181-182). This might be true in other scenarios, but not as much in *The Awakening*. In the final chapter, Edna acknowledges that people (specifically lovers) will come and go from her life and that it does not matter in the long run (Chopin 175). She wants freedom more than any one person and is unwilling to compromise on this. Edna's identity is born from the need for the self to exist independently without needing someone else to make her whole. These are early ideas for identity in *The Awakening*; more recent analyses suit the argument for suicide versus survival to a greater degree.

Modern interpretations of individuality and identity in *The Awakening* lend themselves to examining why Edna survived her final swim in the sea. It does not take much to realize that Edna's evolution into a person results in her distancing herself from many situations and people who once dominated her life. Robert Treu notes that loneliness in some forms can destroy a person, but that it is also known as solitude, which is ultimately necessary for freedom (Treu 30).

Individuality inherently requires separating from other people, either physically, emotionally, or both. Edna knows this—consciously or unconsciously—and works to extricate herself from being wholly owned by the other people in her life. She becomes “the regal woman [...] who stands alone” (Chopin 145). Nevertheless, Edna is also “unwilling or unable” to express herself, Teddy Duncan argues, because when she does, she is met with arguments, confusion, and anger from those around her (Duncan 194). Identity and individuality for a woman include, in the context of the novel, an unspoken need to leave certain thoughts unsaid in order to fully enjoy and entertain the growth of the individual. If Edna were to have explained every notion she has but does not understand, then the patriarchal society would have made sure to prevent any further deviations from what is acceptable for a white, middle-class woman. Her identity is firmly rooted in the secrecy of her thoughts, in the privacy of an individual’s mind. A proper understanding of how identity and individuality function within *The Awakening* is essential for any critical reading of the novel, especially when analyzing the technically ambiguous ending.

Edna’s growing sense of self provides context for the implication that she does not die after the novel’s conclusion. In the penultimate chapter, Edna finally admits to Doctor Mandelet that the only thing she truly wants is to live her own way, though she claims to recognize that this is an enormous ask considering how it would “trample” on prejudices and lives (Chopin 171). In several other situations throughout her maturation of identity, Edna is so impulsive in following her desires that even Madame Ratignolle comments that Edna is almost childlike in her spontaneity (153). If Edna is prone to acting immediately and surely on her desires, then it makes no sense that she would choose to die rather than continue to follow her own path as much as possible. It is essential to her character to seek happiness and fulfillment in whatever way is available to her. On the other hand, the article “The Bird That Came out of the Cage” explains

that Edna's death should be viewed as an act of liberation, at least according to Clark's interpretation. However, this is a flawed view of Edna's character. Liberation from the patriarchy and stifling societal expectations of women does not equate to a death sentence. Clark paints suicide as a positive element of Edna's internal development. Yet death is succumbing to external forces—not defying them. Edna would be surrendering the fight by removing herself from the ring in the middle of a match. All she wants is her way, her individuality. Death contradicts that. Liberation can only come from perseverance until triumph, which means Edna has to survive in order to claim her victory. A careful examination of Edna's sense of identity (as well as other elements external to her existence as a person) presents a suitable backdrop for the argument that she does not commit suicide.

Edna's survival is evident in more than just her words and actions; the motif of the sea reveals that what is typically seen as her death is, in fact, a rebirth. Based on his own analysis, Robert Treu infers that Edna refuses to take a short swim under male supervision and instead swims past the point of panic as a way for her psyche to survive (Treu 32). This reading does define an ending of sorts, but not one of permanence. It is the end of the submissive, desperate Edna who ever listened to Leonce or wanted Robert's love. It is the beginning of the individual Edna, who ignores the internal voice of her father and the fading echoes of a calvary officer, choosing to focus on the bees and the distinctly feminine scent of pinks. Cuff's article "Enda's Sense of an Ending" explains that Edna is seeking a rebirth as some form of feminist version of the Madonna or as an Aphrodite figure, free from the constraint of male examples (Cuff 328). In truth, Edna did not go into the sea in the final chapter to die, but in an attempt to bring out her new self. She even notices how she feels like a naked, newborn creature when standing at the sea's edge (Chopin 175). Water (in both mythology and literature) is a longstanding, common

symbol for rebirth; for example, this can be seen in Aphrodite's creation from ancient Greek mythology and Etain's evolution in medieval Irish mythology. It would be jarring and counterintuitive for Chopin to subvert this well-known, recurring motif when *The Awakening's* ending is already ambiguous. External elements, such as the setting of the sea, specify that Edna does not just survive the last depicted swimming scene, but actually experiences a metaphorical rebirth.

An article written by Robert Kohn further proves that the sea is evidence of rebirth, though he does so accidentally. His article, "Edna Pontellier Floats into the Twenty-First Century," centers on a play written by Schvey that is based on *The Awakening*, with some creative liberties taken in the narrative's progression. In his play, Schvey rewrites the ending to have Edna be whisked away to an underwater kingdom that Kohn envisions as a representation of the Nirvana Principle, or "death drive," developed by Freud (Kohn 147, 150). The Nirvana Principle, in simple terms, theorizes that all beings yearn for a reduction to zero, or a state of empty feelings, which inevitably leads to a desire for death and the return to silent nothingness. Edna's joy (in the play) does not truly originate from an anticipation of death. Relinquishing her life on the land for a life in the sea is symbolic of rebirth and not the ending Kohn interprets it as. Even within the novel, the narrator describes the sea as a soothing embrace for the soul and body, evoking the image of a maternal figure holding a child only to release them again into the world (Chopin 57). Essentially, it is a place where Edna can exist unrestrained, representing comfort for the mind and freedom of the body. Death is not so tranquil nor protective, merely a device to remove a soul from the world at its ending. Schvey's modern retelling aims to depict the favored reading of suicide, yet it accidentally proves otherwise.

Furthermore, the sea goes beyond solitary representations of rebirth, illustrating Edna's understanding of her developing identity and individuality in greater depth. Cuff's article "Edna's Sense of Ending" argues for the silence at the novel's end, seemingly knowing that Edna is now too far out from the shore and cannot turn back (Cuff 343). From Cuff's perspective, remaining in the sea would lead to death, whereas the shore symbolizes survival and perseverance. Edna is growing physically tired from the extended swim—that much is clearly stated by the novel in the last two pages. It could further be argued that Edna is emotionally and mentally tired as well from dealing with the troubles placed on her as a young woman and mother. Although, she will not drown (intentionally or not) just because she has grown weary in body and spirit from the trials of being a woman. When talking with Doctor Mandelet, Edna explains that she feels it is better to "wake up" and realize how long and how much she has been suffering than to remain asleep, easily tricked into a false delusion of happiness for the entirety of her life (Chopin 171). The sea is Edna's mode of awakening as a person and individual, which is an experience she is grateful for no matter what pain it brings along with it. She refuses to succumb to lies, deceit, or the powers of others, no matter how good-willed the intentions behind these things are. Edna will continue to fight for herself and her sense of identity, which inevitably implies that she will not commit suicide, if only for her own sake. On top of being representative of Edna's metaphorical rebirth, the sea mirrors Edna's perceptions of how her individuality affects her life.

With a complete understanding of Edna's character, it becomes clear that her survival is rooted in the act of redefining femininity. Ivy Schweitzer claims that in her defiant actions, Edna is mimicking the male role models around her because they are her only examples (Schweitzer 171, 172). This appears to be a reasonable assumption. Humans learn how to behave by



observing the actions of other people around them, so it seems safe to assume that Edna's new individuality is born from her understanding of how men operate in the world since they are the ones with the most societal freedom and power. Yet, at various points, Edna recognizes (or almost recognizes) that her position as a woman makes her vulnerable to the authority of the men. If she views it as a controlling regime that she wants to be free of, why would she actively work to make her person reminiscent of the men in power? Schweitzer also defines freedom as owning oneself and being able to give the self to whoever is desired (Schweitzer 177). The second half of this definition is inaccurate to Edna as a character. She so desperately wants to own herself that she admits she would laugh if Leonce or Robert made the presumption to own her (Chopin 167). Edna seeks freedom of her individual person, but she does not intend to find it by acting as the men do. Instead, she reclaims and redefines femininity according to her specific desires and needs. Edna recognizes that she might be acting in a way that is considered "unwomanly," but that it is only due to the development of her expressing herself (Chopin 165). "Unwomanly" behavior is not indicative of manly behavior. Instead, it demonstrates a new state of existence that is not typical of the novel's defined femininity or masculinity. In order to successfully redefine a gender role, there needs to be survival; otherwise, it is a failure. Edna is not trying to die—rather, she is ultimately working toward redefining femininity.

Overall, Edna is not meant to be a tragic character. Cuff notices in her article that Edna wants to avoid endings whenever possible (Cuff 332). This aversion carries over into the ending of life as well. In the grand scheme of existence, death is the epitome of endings. Once one has died, there can be no more beginnings, and everything else in life comes to an abrupt and permanent stop as well. *The Awakening* as a novel may end, but Edna wants to continue and not let her story conclude with the final words or the implication of dying. Robert Treu even

comments that one of the controlling factors of the final chapter is Chopin's vocabulary, which evokes feelings of "rebirth and rebellion" (Treu 30). Chopin's choice of words conveys her intention for Edna to be perceived as a strong, determined survivor. It is a subtle effect that does not overshadow the factual ambiguity of the ending, yet still subconsciously directs readers to see Edna's future in a positive, triumphant light. Her story is about her growth as an individual and her recognition of personal desires; its effect would be far more impactful if the heroine were to live, having successfully achieved her goal, rather than dying in a futile attempt at freedom. Tragedy is not the purpose of Edna's tale in *The Awakening*, as that devalues all of her previous growth.

Edna Pontellier does not commit suicide after the ending of *The Awakening*; she is not meant to be a tragic character, and death undermines the development of individuality and identity she undergoes earlier in the novel. Other scholars tend to believe in a suicidal narrative due to societal pressures and inaccurate interpretations of Edna's sense of identity. Even so, it is precisely because of how identity and individuality are presented in the novel that readers can conclude that Edna survives her final swim. The sea itself serves as a representation of Edna's rebirth and acts as a mirror for her growth, leading to modern retellings that support an argument for her survival. In the end, Edna is redefining the way femininity should be presented in the novel's society, further expanding the idea that Edna's story is not meant to end as a tragedy. Suicide is a difficult topic to talk about—thankfully, this story is not so sorrowful that death is something in need of discussion.

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