Edna's Awakening and Fantasy in *The Awakening*

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When Kate Chopin's *The Awakening,* now acclaimed an American masterpiece, was first published in the spring of 1899, the book and its author were showered with cold criticism and stern reprimands. The attacks specifically focused on Chopin's frank treatment of the novel's protagonist, Edna Pontellier. Many reviewers found Edna's growing independence and sexual behavior *"shocking," "sickening," and "selfish."* One reviewer went as far as proclaiming that "The *Awakening* is too strong drink for moral babes, and should be labeled 'poison'" (qtd.in Walker, 14). Because of the overwhelmingly negative reactions, the book, for more than fifty years following its publication, had been buried and its author completely forgotten.

The reawakening of the book came only when the French critic Cyrille Arnavon, in 1953, gave this book a positive assessment by comparing it to Gustave Flaubert's masterpice *Madame Bovary* (Walker, 144). The emergence of the feminist criticism in 1970s had a tremendous effect on rehabilitating the book and its author. Since then *The Awakening,* once condemned as poisonous, has been regarded as an important landmark of feminist writing and Edna's rebellion against the role of wife and mother has been proclaimed as a prototype of the free woman.

As much as the feminists would like to see Edna's rebellion as a model of the new woman, Chopin's treatment of this character is very problematic. This would be more obvious when we compare it with Flaubert's treatment of Emma in *Madame Bovary.* Whereas Flaubert explicitly criticizes Emma's self-deception and romantic fantasy, Chopin's portrayal of Edna's awakening is ambivalent.[1] We can admire Edna's heroic struggle for independence and her adamant rebellion against the role of a home-bound housewife. Yet we cannot overlook her sexually romantic fantasy that overpowers her and partially leads her to self-destruction. Despite the positive connotation of the title, *The Awakening,* Chopin presents Edna's new consciousness with opposed attitudes.

Edna began to feel like one who awakens gradually out of a dream, a delicious, grotesque, impossible dream, to feel again the realities pressing into her soul. The physical need for sleep began to overtake her; the exuberance which had sustained and exalted her spirit left the conditions which crowded her in.[2]

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[1] See also Susan J. Rosowski's view on different narrative treatments of these two works. I, however, quite disagree with her suggestion that in *The Awakening* "the ironic distance of *Madame Bovary* is replaced by a high degree of narrative sympathy". (46)

[2] Kate Chopin, *The Awakening* (1899; New York: Bantam, 1981) pp.41-42. Further page references to this edition will appear in the text.

The juxtaposition between "delicious" and "grotesque" raises the question if the dream—her married life with Léonce Pontellier—is, after all, repulsive. The dichotomy between her awakening and her somnolence raises an even more poignant question whether Edna awakens from a dream or slumbers into a fantasy.

Chopin constructs two concurrent plots of Edna's awakening: her struggle for independence and her pursuit of sexual fulfilment, both of which contrast and oppose each other. While the narrative of Edna's struggle for independence steadily develops toward her self-discovery, the narrative of her sexual desire fluctuates like a sea wave, advancing toward sexual-fulfilment and regressing to her childhood fantasy. The book begins with two main elements of Edna's life that lead to her new consciousness and develop into two parallel plots of her awakening. Following her quarrel with Léonce and her acquaintance with Robert, Edna "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" (17). After this crucial moment, these two plots of her awakening start to diverge and take their own shapes.

Recognizing herself as an independent human being, Edna openly challenges her husband's authority and resists his domination. One night during her stay at Grand Isle, Edna, refusing to get into the house as Léonce demanded, "perceived that her will had blazed up, stubborn and resistant. She could not at that moment have done other than denied and resisted" (41). From this point, Edna's struggle for independence progresses steadily. She may not, in the course of her struggle, be able to conceptualize what her new self is but she knows what she does not want to be. Since childhood, Edna already possessed a latently rebellious spirit and her decision to marry Léonce was partly derived from Edna's defiance of the family authority. "Add to [her fancy] the violent opposition of her father and her sister Margaret to her marriage with a Catholic, and we need seek no further for the motives which led her to accept Monsieur Pontellier for her husband" (24). However, while she managed to escape from family control, she merely ended up under her husband's authority. Thus, her later rebellion against her husband is a rejection of the mode of being he embodies as well as a struggle for independence. She rejects and feels pity for Adèle's "colorless existence which never uplifted its possessor beyond the region of blind contentment" (74). After returning to New Orleans she stops playing the role of a hostess who entertains friends every Tuesday, ceasing to be a perfect housewife who manages the household affairs (65-68). Scolded by her complaining husband, Edna resolves "never to take another step backward" (75).

Not only does she refuse to step back to the "colorless existence," but she also advances further than her husband would imagine. While Léonce is doing his business in New York, Edna decides to move out of "his" big house and finds "her" own house without waiting for his permission (105-108, 111). She also becomes financially independent by selling her sketches. Her pigeon house may be deplorable, compared with the big house where she used to live, yet, Chopin points out that" there was with her a feeling of having descended in the social scale, with a corresponding sense of having risen in the spiritual. Every step which she took toward relieving herself from obligations added to her strength and expansion as an individual" (124). Edna's moving out of her husband's house signifies a major step of unbinding herself from social conventions and obligations. Her sexual affair with Arobin thus can be read as Edna's rejection of sexual decorum imposed on her as well as an expression of her free will. Her independent spirit frightens even Robert. Listening to Robert's dream of marrying her after Léonce sets her free, Edna retorts:

"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."

His face grew ***a little white.*** "What do you mean?" he asked. (142-143, italics mine)

Despite her passionate love for Robert, Edna insists that their relationship must be based on her terms, not his or her husband's. Robert's flight from Edna may partly result from his fright of her independence. Her suicide, paradoxically, is a form of rejecting another social obligation—her children—in order to preserve her essential self. One may object that although her suicide liberates her from social conventions, it destroys her.

Yet we cannot help admiring her undaunted spirit as Priscilla Allen proclaims: "The heroism of Edna is that she is able to pursue her felt needs with so little guilt and that rather than settling for less than a chance to fulfil them she chooses instead to die..... *The Awakening* is ..... a portrait of a woman determined to have full integrity, full personhood—or nothing." (Allen, 238)

However, Edna's uncompromising struggle for independence seems to be only half of her portrait. As Chopin points out, "at a very early period [Edna] had apprehended instinctively the dual life—that outward existence which conforms, the inward life which question" (18). Edna's dual life persists even after her awakening. Outwardly, Edna strives for freedom; inwardly, her emotions fluctuate between childish fantasy and sexual desire. The fluctuating movement of the narration of her sexual life progresses toward her sexual fulfilment as well as regresses to a sexual fantasy of her childhood.

Immediately after Edna begins to recognize her personhood and her inner desire (17), the narrative switches to Edna's telling Adéle her past and her childhood fantasy. In her narrative, Edna explicitly makes a connection between the awakening of her desire and her romantic fantasy in the past. She tells Adèle that "sometimes I feel this summer as if I were walking through the green meadow again; idly, aimlessly, unthinking and unguided" (22). She continues by saying that all her childhood fantasy started "when she traversed the ocean of waving grass" (23). Chopin thus implies that Edna's sexual awakening is her relapse into a romantic dream of "a dignified and sad-eyed cavalry officer," "an engaged young man," and "a great tragedian" (23). Furthermore, the description of Edna's telling the story is ambivalent. "She was flushed and felt intoxicated with the sound of her own voice and the unaccustomed taste of candor. It muddled her like wine, or like a first breath of freedom" (24). The last sentence shows again the polarity between Edna's entering into a fantasy and her awakening out of a dream.

Edna's reponse to the inner desire and regression to the childhood fantasy fomr a pattern which she keeps repeating throughout the book. When Robert suddenly leaves for Mexico, Edna connects her love for Robert with her past romantic fantasy. "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. The recognition did not lessen the reality, the poignancy of the revelation by any suggestion or promise of instability" (59). During her father's visit, Edna displaces her unfulfilled desire for Robert with her extraordinary care for her father that is obviously other than "a deep filial attchment" as her husband ignorantly assumes (91). At the end of her father's visit, Edna again resorts to a fantasy by telling a romance of "a woman who paddled away with her lover one night in a pirogue and never came back" (p.93). Romantic though her story may be, Edna reverses the female role in a conventional romance. Instead of being taken away by a lover, the woman in Edna's romance takes her lover away. Her intimate relationship with Arobin is another displacement of her unfulfilled desire for Robert. After her sexual affair with Arobin, Edna seeks emotional comfort by visiting her children (125). Edna's constant regression to her childhood and her past romantic fantasy through memory and direct contacts with her children seems to diminish the gravity of her new consciousness, posing the question whether Edna advances toward an independent and free woman or relapses into romantic fantasy.

James H. Justus comments that "the awakening of Edna Pontellier is in actuality a reawakening; it is not an advance toward a new definition of self but a return to the protective, self-evident identity of childhood." (112) Justus offers a psychological explanation of Edna's regression to childhood: "Edna does not will herself forward to embrace new experiences attendant upon her sensual and spiritual awakening, but drifts languidly backward, to the realm of romance and dreams." (114) Chopin, in many places, describes Edna's pursuit of sexual fulfilment negatively. During her intimate relationship with Robert at Grand Isle, Chopin tells us that Edna "was blindly following whatever impulse moved her, as if she had placed herself in alien hands for direction, and freed her soul of responsibility" (42). This seems to portray Edna as an irresponsible and passive person. The word "blindly" strongly suggests illusion and self-deception. Mademoiselle

. s lies when Edna talks about her
ıt of Léonce's house on the grounds
not want to deal with too many servants.
Reisz tells that "'Oh! I see there is no deceiving you.
ıet me tell you: It is a caprice'" (p.105). Adèle also
ıls Edna that "'In some way you seem to me like a child, Edna. You seem to act without a certain amount of reflection which is necessary in this life'" (127).

On the other hand, Chopin seems to stress that Edna's sexual awakening opens up new vistas of her life and experience. Like her experience of swimming out into the sea alone, Edna's discovery of her sexual passion leads her to traverse another realm of life "where no woman had swum before," inducing her to reach out "for the unlimited in which to lose herself " (36). Thus, it can be argued that Edna's regression is a deliberate attempt to comprehend her new experiences and to familiarize herself with her sexual passions so that she can advance toward her independence. When Edna relates her love for Robert to her past romantic fantasy, she hopes that the past may guide and help her to cope with her present state of infatuation. "The past was nothing to her; offered no lesson which *she was willing to heed*" (59, italics mine). Her visit to the children soon after her sexual affair with Arobin is described as emotional rejuvenation. "She lived with them a whole week long, giving them all of herself, and *gathering and filling herself with their young existence*" (125, italics mine). Edna's regression to childhood thus embodies both constructive and delusive aspects.

The last part of the book fuses the polarized narration of Edna's struggle for independence and her pursuit of sexual gratification, blending her childhood fantasy with her sexual reality. Robert's return from Mexico seems to shatter Edna's fantasy of him. When she unexpectedly meets him at Mademoiselle Reisz's apartment, his formality and indifference puzzle her. "She had been with him, had heard his voice and touched his hand. But some way he had seemed nearer to her off there in Mexico" (136). Ironically, their unexpected meeting, dramatized in this scene as a dream, invokes Edna's sense of reality and crushes her romantic fantasy of Robert. His proposal to marry her fuses her dual life: her pursuit of independence and sexual fulfilment. Robert's proposal demystifies her romantic notion of him as a lover. When Robert confesses that he wishes her to be his wife, Edna exclaims '"Your wife!'" (142). Moreover, Robert's plan to marry her after Léonce sets her free provokes Edna's dignity of an independent woman. Thus, not only does Robert become less a romantic lover, but he also becomes more the potentially insensitive and dominating husband that Edna has been resisting. The clash of her polarized life resulting from Robert's proposal precipitates Edna into making a decision to end her dilemma. Her presence at Adèle's giving birth to a child prompts Edna to think of her responsibilities for her children and reminds her of her own childbirth. However, her regression to childhood this time offers no romantic fantasy but acute sufferings: "With an inward agony, with a flaming, outspoken revolt against the ways of Nature, she witnessed the scene of torture" (146). Her suicide at the end seems to be a combined outcome of her new discoveries: the inevitable clash between her freedom and her sexual desire epitomized by Robert's proposal, the inescapable responsibilities for her children invoked by the childbirth scene, and the disillusion of her childhood fantasy.

Edna's suicide thus expresses her refusal to capitulate to social obligations that impede the realization of her freedom and independence; as she states explicitly to the doctor "'perhaps it is better to wake up after all, even to suffer, rather than to remain a dupe to illusions all one's life'" (147). Yet it is doubtful how much Edna has discovered when Chopin leaves us with Edna's regression to childhood again at her dying moment. "Edna heard her father's voice and her sister Margaret's. She heard the barking of an old dog that was chained to the sycamore tree. The spurs of the cavalry officer clanged as he walked across the porch" (153). Somehow Edna still clings to her romantic fantasy in the past, despite her awakening out of a domestic "colorless existence." It is Chopin, not Edna, then, who refuses to yield to any kind of illusions, however grand and heroic they may be, by relentlessly depicting both Edna's pursuit of independence and her lapse into a romantic fantasy.

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