

Space, place and identity in Kate Chopin's *The Awakening*

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The Awakening was written and published at the end of the nineteenth century. Kate Chopin, the author, was severely criticized for depicting a sexualized and independent-thinking woman who questions her role within the southern patriarchy. Re-discovered in the 1960s by American critics, *The Awakening* finally gained the recognition it deserves.

The novel revolves around Edna Pontellier, a southern mother-wife who starts to realize there is more to womanhood than she had imagined or known. Grand Isle and New Orleans (state of Louisiana, U.S.A.) are the locations where Edna's transformation unfolds. In such a multi-cultural background (American, southern, Creole, French, Spanish) she embarks upon a trip of exploration, self-discovery, truth and realization in order to find her own place in the world.

The aim of this paper is to explore Edna Pontellier's character and the role played by the geographical, social and human environment in the definition of her identity. In the attempt we will make references to Edna's personality, her relation with the sea, her awakening self, the lack of space she experiences, the search for a place of her own, the influence of the surrounding communities, her relationship with men and her suicide.

Edna's nature: the volcano

The first striking element in the novel is the protagonist's first name: Edna reminds one of Etna, the Italian volcano. The resemblance is not only phonological: Edna can be seen as a volcano because she cannot move. She is rooted, tied to a certain place and by extension to a certain way of life, with fixed roles and strict behaviors to observe. Edna as a volcano also appears to be calmly sleeping but in fact has a rich inner life full of fire, steam and passion. And also as a volcano, Edna is on the verge of eruption, on the verge of *awakening*.

Following this line of analysis, Edna as a volcano is full of fire. Not surprisingly, she has a special relationship with water. In chapter 1, we are introduced to her when she comes back from the sea with Robert, where they had an 'amusing adventure out in the water' (Chopin, 2003: 45). Swimming represents a challenge to her: at first, 'a certain ungovernable dread hung about her when in the water, unless there was a hand near by

that might reach out and reassure her' (Chopin, 2003: 73). When Edna finally dares to swim she discovers a new world: she feels powerful and joyful, strong and full of bliss. However, her nature faces a threat when 'a quick vision of death smote her soul, and for a second of time appalled and enfeebled her senses. But by an effort she rallied her staggering faculties and managed to regain the land.' (Chopin, 2003: 74).

Edna's composition of fire is naturally threatened by water: she is scared of venturing into the sea alone. However, water triggers her awakening and she feels good when swimming, her body being in contact with the caressing water, her person realizing that she does have the ability to swim after all. But too much water will extinguish her essential fire, her bodily sensations, her recently acquired knowledge, her just discovered *self*: she is confronted with death and has to struggle to go back to the shore.

On occasion of the trip to Chênrière Caminada, Edna's connection with the sea is so strong that she equals herself with a ship, feeling 'as if she were being borne away from some anchorage which had held her fast, whose chains had been loosening -- had snapped the night before when the mystic spirit was abroad, leaving her free to drift whithersoever she chose to set her sails.' (Chopin, 2003:81) The sea refreshes her, accelerates her trip towards self-awareness and gives her freedom. In the sea she feels loose, at liberty, in peace with herself.

When Edna is on the island and starts feeling dizzy, she only hears 'the voice of the sea whispering through the reeds that grew in the salt-water pools' (Chopin, 2003: 83) and longs for water to revive her. Her inner fire seems to burn more and more while she is on that island far away from everybody and close to Robert, and only water can save her.

When in New Orleans, Edna often remembers the sea: 'She could hear again the ripple of the water, the flapping sail.' (Chopin, 2003: 109) These memories are connected to her desire, to a burning feeling inside her body and to her maritime feeling of freedom.

At the end of the novel Edna chooses to go back to Grand Isle. Totally naked, she faces the sea feeling reborn, like a baby out of its mother's womb. Water –once again– saves Edna, awarding her eternal freedom. Edna's process of awakening, which started in Grand Isle, is completed in the same place. She can go back to sleep, like a volcano after eruption.

The fuel of fire is oxygen. Edna's inner fire needs oxygen to remain alive. *Edna needs air*. She is choking for lack of air in her life. She needs space and a place of her own to go on living. She needs to breathe.

When back in New Orleans after the holidays in Grand Isle, Edna stops following her reception-day schedule: instead of being at home to receive her callers she goes out because, as she explains to her husband, 'I simply felt like going out, and I went out.' (Chopin, 2003: 100) Her traditional town life does not suit her anymore; she needs to explore new spaces.

In chapter 34, for example, Edna is left alone because Mr. Pontellier has to travel to New York. Feeling relieved, she goes about the house re-discovering it, enjoying each room for the first time. She has a new relation with the place, she does not feel trapped anymore and she suddenly can breathe. Husband and children gone, she finally feels at ease. However, this is only temporary. In her next visit to Mlle Reisz Edna expresses her will to move into a house round the corner: 'I know I shall like it, like the feeling of freedom and independence.' (Chopin, 2003: 134)

Places

The action is set in two main locations: Grand Isle and New Orleans. These places limit Edna, who is trapped in her social roles of mother and wife in the first case and hostess and lady of the house in the second. However, they also contain a way out: Chênrière Caminada, and Mlle Reisz's apartment and the pigeon house.

Grand Isle

Since most men are away during the week and join their families at the weekends, Grand Isle functions as a place for women in the exercise of their expected duties. Mme Lebrun gives orders to her servants; Adele Ratignolle sews or plays the piano to entertain her kids. Women chat, watch their children and wait for their husbands. But Edna does not fit. She feels caged. She is regarded as a careless mother and as an inconsiderate wife by her husband, and she does not deny it. At night she cannot sleep and she often cries. Somehow she cannot get herself to be a mother-wife-woman. She is different. But there is one place where Edna manages to feel free.

Chênrière Caminada

This green island with foreign name acts as kind of paradise for Edna, who finally manages to sleep. The power of sleep is such that Edna feels a different woman when she opens her eyes. Something of her old self died during sleep to make room for her new

self. Now awake, Edna is a new creature, wiser, self-conscious, in contact with her reality. Once back in Grand Isle she realizes that she has spent one whole day with Robert, something that makes her feel good. Edna has gained knowledge about life and about her own person: ‘She could only realize that she herself –her present self– was in some way different from the other self.’ (Chopin, 2003: 88) *Edna is awakening*.

But the holidays are soon over, Robert has left for Mexico and Edna has to go back to town.

New Orleans

New Orleans is the bastion of societal rules, of “realistic” life and duties. Edna is back in her house, where she has to play the social hostess, the lady of the house, the mother. She is caged again. But after the holidays she is not the same. She has discovered herself and there is no stop to her trip towards realization now, let alone reversal. Edna devotes more and more time to painting in her bright atelier. She starts going out, she locates and starts visiting Mlle Reisz, she goes to the races. Edna starts living for herself as a woman and in doing so she comes into conflict with her social roles. She neglects her children, her servants, her acquaintances, and her husband’s house. Mr. Pontellier thinks Edna is not herself anymore, and yet she is being herself more than ever before.

Mlle Reisz’s apartment

When back in town after the holidays, Edna decides to visit Mlle Reisz. Edna feels at ease at Mlle’s apartment. There she can connect with her passions: art and Robert. Mlle Reisz is Edna’s bridge towards Robert, either by producing his letters from Mexico or by invoking him with her Chopin’s Impromptu at the piano. ‘There was nothing which so quieted the turmoil of Edna's senses as a visit to Mademoiselle Reisz. It was then, in the presence of that personality which was offensive to her, that the woman, by her divine art, seemed to reach Edna's spirit and set it free.’ (Chopin, 2003: 133)

It is to Mlle Reisz that Edna first communicates her decision of moving. It is in Mlle’s apartment that Edna admits her love for Robert and later re-encounters him. The apartment is a safe shelter for Edna and her feelings.

The pigeon house

Edna does not feel at home in her husband’s residence. She has discovered a cozy house round the corner, and she is capriciously determined to move, no matter what her husband –or anyone– has to say.

Even when the move makes her feel that she has gone down the social scale, it also means a spiritual ascension: ‘every step which she took toward relieving herself

from obligations added to her strength and expansion as an individual. She began to look with her own eyes; to see and to apprehend the deeper undercurrents of life.’ (Chopin, 2003: 151)

The pigeon house is Edna’s territory, her home and atelier. It makes her feel she has a place of her own, where she is lady and mistress. She decorates the place fully to her taste, she has only one servant and she invites Arobin and Robert in. In a word, she lets her womanhood unfold there, in her own terms.

Edna’s surroundings

Edna lives in a multi-cultural environment, surrounded by different kinds of people. She has fixed roles and a certain range of behaviors to follow, but she is sometimes confused when in contact with a certain group not her own. Edna does not seem to fit fully into any group.

The Creole Community

This group of people is defined by its Catholicism, conservative views, personal and religious commitment and conversational openness. Adele Ratignolle –‘the embodiment of every womanly grace and charm’ (Chopin, 2003: 51)– is the best example, with the exemplary fulfillment of her roles and the shocking nature of her conversations. Edna is in contrast to Adele: she is not considered a good mother, she would not sacrifice herself for her children, she is not interested in sewing and she cannot handle Robert’s flirtation without getting involved. Although married to a Creole and being surrounded by them in Grand Isle, Edna is not one of them. She is a Presbyterian, she cannot speak or understand French, she finds their chat topics embarrassing and their way of flirting with each other puzzling. However, she allows herself to play along, without realizing the danger of this. She opens up with Adele, she enjoys Robert’s company full time, she plays with him in front of everybody and she allows all kinds of seductive scenes to take place. What is a common Creole game turns into a serious affair for Edna, who falls in love with Robert, and for Robert himself, who has to leave for Mexico for the same reason.

Within this Creole community we also find Mlle Reisz, somebody Edna likes to be with but most other characters dislike. Mlle Reisz is an artist and a spinster. She lives alone. She has no taste to dress and a self-assertive ‘artistic’ temper. Mlle Reisz represents the kind of woman who follows her nature, but in so doing does not fit into the married-with-children housewife model that society thinks desirable. Mlle Reisz is not

any man's property; she has her own apartment and she is her own lord and master. In this light, art becomes a symbol of freedom. Edna admires Mlle's talent and wants to be an artist too, but we know since the beginning that she lacks 'the courageous soul', 'the soul that dares and defies' (Chopin, 2003: 115)

The fact that both Adele and Mlle Reisz play the piano says a lot: Adele does it in the accepted circle of her household to entertain the family, and so she is highly praised. Mlle is a true artist, but since she does not follow the expected social pattern she is not taken into consideration (save for Robert and Edna). Edna and her painting are between the two poles. She attempts to paint something in Grand Isle, then she starts painting regularly in her house. Her art awakes with her, becoming a form of sublimation of her sexual desire and a way of asserting her own identity. We can perceive her need of introducing herself as *Edna, the artist* and stop being *the mother* or *the wife*.

The South

The South is embodied in Edna's father, who owned a plantation in Mississippi, had been a colonel in the Confederate army and 'still maintained, with the title, the military bearing which had always accompanied it.' (Chopin, 2003: 120) He inspires respect and admiration: he is considered a guest of honor at the Ratignolle's. Nevertheless, his coercive manners and authoritative ways led Edna's mother to the grave. The colonel is a violent man, someone with vices who 'used to atone for his weekday sins with his Sunday devotions.' (Chopin, 2003: 118) He believes women have to be treated with anything but leniency. He embodies American hypocrisy.

Spanish and French elements

Spanish and French presence is manifested in names (e.g. Chênrière Caminada, Ratignolle), words (Quartier Francais, peignoir, Mademoiselle), characters (Spanish Mariequita) and atmosphere (Adele's 'very French, very foreign (...) manner of living' (Chopin, 2003: 195)) All these elements give an exotic, sensual, mysterious touch to Edna's surroundings.

Edna's men

Her father

Edna seems to have had a difficult relation with her father signed by authority and discipline. She still remembers with a chill the way in which he used to say his Presbyterian prayers. Although she is not attached to him and they have some heated arguments, she welcomes his visit in New Orleans and they manage to spend a good time

together. The injuries of the past seem to be definitely healed, a fundamental condition for Edna to fully realize her own adult person and her relations with men.

Her husband

Mr. Pontellier refers to Edna as a possession, as some purchased property to be displayed and admired by society. Edna married Leonce ‘without love as an excuse.’ (Chopin, 2003: 132) Their relationship is merely economical. Mr. Pontellier does not understand his wife at all.

Her lover

Arobin is a Don Juan who helps Edna in her sexual awakening. Arobin knows how to make Edna’s fire burn. He introduces her to the enjoyment of her own sexuality. He knows how to appeal ‘to the animalism that stirred impatiently within her.’ (Chopin, 2003: 133) He does not mean anything to her, though. She does not love him.

Her true love

Robert and Edna are in love with each other. Robert represents true love, but impossible of concretion. Robert is the one who lit Edna’s inner fire in Grand Isle. After their re-encounter in New Orleans Edna is reckless, daring, dazzled: ‘It was you who awoke me last summer out of a life-long, stupid dream. Oh! you have made me so unhappy with your indifference. Oh! I have suffered, suffered! Now you are here we shall love each other, my Robert. We shall be everything to each other. Nothing else in the world is of any consequence.’ (Chopin, 2003: 168)

There is nothing to win and everything to lose in Edna and Robert’s love. After all, Robert also wants to ‘own’ Edna, to make her his wife. In the end, Edna –fully awake– understands that there is no space for her new self in her society.

Conclusion

Edna Pontellier is a misplaced creature. In a culture not her own, she starts exploring the territory of her own person and attempting to build her own personal place within society. Edna goes about experiencing different spaces, people and sensations; and as she goes along in her encounters and discoveries, she awakes to her own reality, which is different from everything around her. Unfortunately, Edna’s reality has no room in her narrow-minded environment. Deprived of a place where to unfold herself, Edna chooses to go back to the place that gave her life in order to put an end to her physical existence

and thus be reborn. Not for nothing her last thoughts were devoted to her childhood: “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. There was the hum of bees, and the musky odor of pinks filled the air.” (Chopin: 2003, 176)

Edna’s suicide has been explained in different ways: she did it because she was pregnant with Arobin’s child, because she was insane, because she was in despair. ⁱ Personally, I believe suicide was the only natural way out for Edna, a way that does not contradict her beliefs, her cause or her character. Edna gained too precious a knowledge to ignore or suppress and remained faithful to her new self until the end. In her own words: “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 : 2003, 97)

Edna’s earthly life seems to be incompatible with her new self. Unable to make them both become one and the same thing, she chooses to sacrifice the former over the latter. By doing away with her physical being she gives full life to her authentic self.

Paradoxically, in a society that gave a woman like Edna no choice, she managed to choose a decent way out. As she herself expresses it to Robert: ‘I am no longer one of Mr. Pontellier's possessions to dispose of or not. *I give myself where I choose.*’ (Chopin, 2003: 167. Emphasis added)

Edna lost her life but gained something vital: freedom of choice and authenticity:
Edna found herself.

<http://www.vcu.edu/engweb/eng384/suicide.htm>_Ways of Interpreting Edna's Suicide: What the Critics Say Neal Wyatt, Virginia Commonwealth University

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