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Psychoanalytic Analysis of The Awakening

In Kate Chopin’s novel The Awakening she develops a character that undergoes a change in mental state over the course of the novel. Edna Pontellier is a married mother of the upper class but finds herself continually unhappy. Although the novel refrains from citing a specifc childhood event to lead to Edna’s unhappiness, she follow the rest of the course of traditional psychoanalytic theory. Edna makes the mistake of uncovering long repressed feelings of discord which lead her to contend with her larger issue of lack of an unambiguous sense of identity culminating in her ideation and embrace of suicide.

The book opens on a vacation at the beach and Edna acting perfectly normal. She befriends Adele, another vacationer, and Robert, one of the facilitators of the camp. Her ability to forge friendships with other people and enjoy their company sincerely illustrates that Edna, at this point in the in her journey, is a functioning and happy person. However, there are hints she may not be perfectly adjusted. She feels like an outsider to the group, particularly because she is of a different culture than the majority and partially because she is uncomfortable with the group's frank discussions of sexual exploits. These outliers suggest that Edna, while functioning appropriately in her setting, has fundamental flaws stemming from her repression of issues. Specifically, her denial of honest sexual intimacy which leads her to fail to connect with the majority of the women on the beach, save Adele.

The true awakening of Edna begins when she swims in earnest for the first time. By embracing the water, which is used as a symbol for her unconsciously suppressed emotions, Edna unearths a lifetime of emotion. In the moment she feels free and strong but when she looks back to shore she has a pang of terror. Edna realizes that she has swum too far out and she will drown. The novel is contained perfectly in this moment. In Edna’s joy she swam too far just like just like she released too much of her long buried turmoil for her to contend with. Eventually, the water will fill her lungs just like the emotions flood her character. While Edna does make it to shore her emotional state for the rest of the novel is thrashed by the waves.

Following her swimming and release Edna has a fight with her husband. In the past he would tell her to do something and she would do it without even thinking about it. She didn’t take commands from him so much as she internalized his desires as her own. If he wanted something so did she. After the release however, it became impossible for her to inform her sense of self from him, as she had done in the past, because she was aware of her lack of identity and sets out to find it.

As the novel progresses three equally important tangents stem from Edna’s desire to find herself. She develops an intense infatuation with Robert, defining herself through another as she had done with her husband. She pursues her artwork which she had a talent for before the awakening and hopes to solidify herself around after. Lastly, she breaks a plethora of social norms she used to subscribe to in an almost crazed attempt to shed off her old life and find her real self.

Robert begins as a flirtatious friend to Edna, she would rebuke his sly advances resolutely. However, after her awakening she spends more and more time with him in increasingly scandalous settings. She spends an entire day practically alone with him on a separate island from the group in a secluded house in lieu of going to church. The most drastic warning sign is as the two of them sit together late at night and feel the desire between them, This prompts Robert to leave for Mexico as his superego asserts itself to avoid the sexual desires of his id that would lead him into an affair with Edna. Following this Edna forges a tradition of visiting her friend, Mademoiselle Riez who receives letters from Robert, and reading them. Thus, it is through Robert who is a socially condemned romantic partner that Edna latches onto. She never gets word from him for a year while he is in Mexico but she holds onto her passion for him. In doing so she reveals that she is channeling it to cast off the numb denial of her past self who would have been appalled at the inappropriate nature of the affair and is seeking to define herself. She wants to be a star crossed lover because she understands that identity, so she finds Robert and uses him as a prop to give herself a role.

Besides Robert, Edna also seeks to define herself through her artwork. Before her awakening she was a light sketch artist. After she spends hours and hours painting, perfecting her art and it appears to work. She becomes talented enough that Adele raves at her skill and she can sell her work with relative ease. However, she loses interest in her pursuit over time because, while it is a success in respect to her ability, she cannot define herself by it. Edna wakes up happy or sad and that dictates whether she will paint. Her intent, conscious or otherwise, in painting was to find a part of identity. Because painting was dependant on her emotions, it isn’t part the bedrock she spends all of her time seeking. It isn’t her.

Edna’s third search for self took the form of indiscriminately breaking past routines and social expectations. She stops taking callers, starts taking bets, and has an affair. By ceasing to take callers Edna merely shirks what she used to do to find purpose, but fails to gain any. Taking bets was an active attempt to discover a nugget of interest, but she is able to stop at a wise time, leave the track when she has made some money, so even an addictive gambling personality evades she. Finally, she takes the most radical action she can in having an affair. However, all that she feels afterwards is guilt for betraying Robert. This illuminates Edna’s identity at this point. She has no tie to her husband or even passion for her lover, she is only hooked to Robert.

When Edna is rejected by Robert she loses the piece of identity she had formed. All her other pursuits failed to show her who she was but in Robert she could allie her being with her desire and forge love. His letter “goodbye… because I love you, goodbye” broke the last hold that she had on herself. The search for an identity had burned all the bridges of her old self and built no new ones. She is left with absolutely nothing. After that revelation she swims out into the water again and lets the foam and sea consume her just as her emotions already had. Edna never should have swum.