

Symbolic Nature in Kate Chopin's The Awakening

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Abstract: The significance of nature in *The Awakening* has been widely acknowledged by numerous researchers, the portrayal of nature in *The Awakening* can not only be seen as the writing feature of Naturalism, but also as Chopin's feminist ideology. Numerous researchers were fascinated by Chopin's feminine mystique, for instance, Amanda Kane Rooks attempted to decipher female sexuality and maternal archetypes in *The Awakening*, and Kathleen M Streater targeted on how the other female character in *The Awakening*, Adele Ratignolle, influences Edna's transformation. Other researchers like Joyce Dyer and Suzanne W. Jones adopted the naturalistic approach, examining the inescapable force of nature in *The Awakening*. By focusing on three distinct categories of natural imagery, the parrot, water-oak and violet, meadow and moonlight, this paper on one hand discusses the unique characteristics and perspectives of the transformation of Edna's psycho world, and on the other hand illustrates the power of nature in naturalistic works, as both Edna's past life and reborn are closely dependent on her interaction with the external natural world.

1. Introduction

Chopin directly addressed the gender issues of her time in *The Awakening*, emphasizing the process of the protagonist's spiritual awakening from the delusion placed upon her by the social environment. Chopin's bold and explicit descriptions of Edna's pursuit of love and sexual desires provoked different responses from the readers after the publication of *The Awakening*, worshiped and welcomed by the female readers while attacked and denounced by the male. *The Awakening* involves numerous natural elements, beneath which lie deeper meanings. It is by presenting nature in a symbolic way that Chopin reveals Edna's struggling inner world and offers an explanation of "the limitations and dangers of her new vision" [2]. Three groups of natural elements stand out from the text, the parrot, water-oak and violet, meadow and moonlight, each group has its own symbolic meaning and indicates the situation and changes of Edna.

2. Symbolic Nature

2.1 The Parrot

The story begins with the scene, in which Mr. Pontellier is reading the newspaper but annoyed by the birds that are instantly singing beside him:

A green and yellow parrot, which hung in a cage outside the door, kept repeating over and over:

“Allez vous-en! Allez vous-en! Sapristi! That’s all right!” [...]

Mr. Pontellier, unable to read his newspaper with any degree of comfort, arose with an expression and an exclamation of disgust [1].

The parrot in *The Awakening* performs a reflective and prophetic function. The detailed descriptions of the parrot mirror the current situation of Edna and indicate her fate. The cage that keeps the parrot is the concrete embodiment of the social responsibilities and patriarchal ideology that imprison Edna. Under such circumstances, both Edna and the parrot show certain tendency of separating their souls and bodies. Edna has complete control over her body but her mind is paralyzed by the patriarchal philosophy; while the parrot is spiritually free but physically captive. Moreover, neither Edna nor the parrots can avoid their fate of being civilized. As the parrot’s ability of speaking Spanish suggests, Edna learns a masculine language which suppresses her natural instincts. The mocking-bird is the representative of other women who are able to hold a ‘female conversation’ with Edna which man could not understand. However, they have less courage than Edna and are still restrained by the submissiveness in themselves.

In addition to Edna’s situation, Chopin leaves hints about Edna’s future life, which is driven by her secret desire to another extreme direction. The strife between Mr. Pontellier and Edna and even the collapse of the family could be foreseen by the intolerance of Mr. Pontellier and the parrot towards each other. A bomb has been planted secretly in their marriage and any tiny spark could start the war of the couple. It is through the mouth of the parrot that Edna’s desire of running away from her husband is straightforwardly and almost impertinently expressed to us and her husband. The parrot and the mocking-bird consider themselves entitled “to make all the noise they wished” [1], in other words, Edna’s fierce resistance against her husband is legitimated by herself. It is noteworthy that Mr. Pontellier reacts to the parrot’s words with anger and disgust, while no anguish and grief are found in his behaviors. Mr. Pontellier’s opinion that he “had the privilege of quitting their society when they ceased to be entertaining” reveals the true relationship of the couple. Edna is never placed in the equal position as her husband because she is merely regarded as a person who entertains man. Once Edna fails to fulfil her entertaining function, she would be viewed as unprofitable and be abandoned by her husband mercilessly [1].

When the parrot appears at the party again, it suggests the tragic ending of Edna’s life which echoes with the last scene, “a bird with a broken wing was beating the air above, reeling, fluttering, circling disabled down, down to the water” [1]. After the parrot utters its exclamation, “the whole venom of his nature apparently having been cherished up and hurled against the twins in that one impetuous outburst” [1]. The narrator ironically attributes Edna’s expression of her desires to her evilness and points out coldly the fact that Edna’s operation is doomed to fail owing to her limited energy and power. Edna’s quest for true self is here negatively viewed from a masculine viewpoint as a behavior of self-destruction motivated by dark forces in women.

Chopin’s depictions of the birds may be understood as Edna’s self-portrait. As a newly born baby bird, Edna struggles to fly but eventually falls to the ground because she is restricted by the game rules and is too weak to survive the pain.

2.2 Water-oak and Violet

In Dyer’s study of the symbolism in *The Awakening*, she points out that water-oak and violet stand for the restraints and limitations of Edna’s awakening [2]. The water-oak serves as a powerful reminder about “the essential biological connection between mothers and children”, since the water-oak is frequently associated with the children playing under its shade [2]. To certain extent, the water-oak shoulders Edna’s responsibility as a mother in her absence and protects the children in its own way, offering them the shield against the strong sunlight. Though Edna attempts to free herself by

indulging in nature, the sight of the water-oaks would inevitably stir up her memory about her children and raise the awareness that her chance of being free is minimized by the maternal responsibility that she can hardly disclaim. Apart from the difficulty of escaping her role as a mother, the water-oak reflects how mothering restricts and oppresses women. Burdened by mothering, the water-oaks would cease “to moan as they bent their heads” [1]. The bent branches of the water-oaks vividly demonstrate how women suffer from their role as a protector. Mothering forces women to position themselves in solitary confinement and an inferior place to their children, bending their heads and catering to their children. The burden of mothering placed upon women is so heavy that they would be eventually crippled or destroyed by it.

As far as violet is concerned, we would automatically identify it as the symbol of Mademoiselle Reisz as she uses it to decorate her hair. Mademoiselle Reisz is, on one hand, an example of a free and independent woman that Edna admires, but on the other hand shatters Edna’s illusion of becoming an artist due to her “emotional and physical deformity” [2]. It is through its connection with the flaws in Mademoiselle Reisz’s character that violet illustrates the restrictions of woman’s freedom. Mademoiselle Reisz is “a disagreeable little woman, no longer young, who had quarreled with almost every one, owing to a temper which was self-assertive and a disposition to trample upon the rights of others” [1]. She achieves her freedom by twisting her character and rejecting the community. Leading a solitary and free life, Mademoiselle Reisz lacks the ability to empathize with others because her life is merely concentrated on herself. And the absence of husband and children excludes her from the possibility of being recognized by the society and further deteriorates her ability to socialize. In this way, Edna’s freedom or awakening is restricted to certain degree that the psychological world may be twisted and some of Edna’s attractive features may be eradicated.

2.3 Meadow and Moonlight

In addition to the water-oaks and violet that are related to the dark sides of Edna’s awakening, Dyer notices the positive messages sent by the meadow and moonlight, which indicate infinity and possibility [2]. When talking with Adele in the porch beside the sea, Edna’s memory about the meadow in Kentucky is triggered by “the sight of the water, stretching so far away, those motionless sails against the blue sky” [1]. Motivated by “a misleading impulse without question”, Edna starts her journey in the Kentucky meadow whose vastness forces her to “walk on forever, without coming to the end of it” [1]. The meadow exposes a new world to Edna, a world without restrictions, boundaries and full of possibilities. The contact with the vast meadow provokes Edna’s curiosity about the world outside her comfort zone and encourages her to search for her own place in the world free of restrictions. Moreover, the Kentucky meadow appears to be a strong support for Edna, offering her the energy to carry out her project. At that summer on Grand Isle she sometimes feels as if she was “walking through the green meadow again; idly, aimlessly, unthinking and unguided” [1]. The meadow in her mind seems to be supporting her preparation of a new life and exposes her desire more clearly to her.

Similarly, the moon delivers messages of possibility and infinity through its unlimited extensibility, but there is a wider range of approaches to it in comparison with the Kentucky meadow, which makes its influence upon Edna stronger. “The mystic moon tempts her with its clear, bright reflection of life’s promise [...] hints at indefinite human expansion and deeply affects Edna” [2]. The tranquillity and unpredictability of the moon create such environment that motivates Edna to create her own romantic stories and to interpret the environment around her differently. In other words, Edna would gradually realize that these romantic stories about the moon can actually be applied on herself. Thus, there could be endless possibilities awaiting her.

3. Conclusion

This investigation has shown that Chopin depicted nature in a symbolic way to reveal Edna's complicated, changing inner world and the different perspectives of her awakening. The parrot acts as the embodiment of Edna's distinctive quality that sets her apart from other conventional and submissive women who are typically tamed by the masculine culture, in the meanwhile, foreshadows Edna's tragic ending. Concerning water-oak and violet, the former represents the force that hinders Edna's embrace of feminist concepts, the latter highlights the limits of the transformation to a woman who is independent of mothering and household duties. Regardless of these threatening perspectives, the meadow and the moonlight demonstrate the positive aspects of Edna's awakening, Edna's adoption of the feminist theory comes with infinite possibilities. By devoting herself to depicting nature, Chopin on one hand demonstrates the core doctrine of Naturalism, a doctrine that emphasizes the characters' subjection to the natural environment, on the other hand illustrates that Edna's awakening may be taken as the interaction with nature. It is by accepting the messages sent from nature that Edna sets out to reflect on herself and awakens to see the hidden possibility of her life and the forge of a new identity.

References

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