THE BATTLE OF 'ISMS' IN KATE CHOPIN'S *THE AWAKENING*

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Abstract: *This article will focus primarily on the ending of The Awakening: A Solitary Soul, probably the most discussed and debated part of Kate Chopin's novel. The ending can be best understood if the novel is read as an exercise in late Transcendentalist philosophy, with Gothic undertones, plus realist, social commentary and modernist concerns. Walt Whitman's hedonism meets Guy de Maupassant's melancholy in a novel that speaks about multiple awakenings (hedonistic, erotic, artistic) but also about several deaths, all necessary for the creation of a new female consciousness.*

Keywords: *death and rebirth, Kate Chopin, Transcendentalism, female Gothic, protomodernism*

1. Introduction

When it was first published in 1899, *The Awakening* created much controversy and, consequently, was met with mixed reviews. Some reviewers praised Kate Chopin's poetic style, but many were shocked by Edna's immoral behaviour and her blatant transgression of the 19th century mores. Thus, the novel was given many less than flattering descriptors: "an aberration", "morbid," "essentially vulgar," and "gilded dirt" (Showalter 2007:8). Most certainly, many contemporary critics were misled by the religious connotations of the title, expecting an entirely different type of awakening. Chopin cleverly challenges all expectations coming from her contemporaries, offering a book ahead of her time. But, unfortunately, the book's reception ended her career before its time. Wheeler (2007:21) called it her "literary suicide", though it was more like an accidental one, with Chopin being much aggrieved and shocked by her novel's reception. In the late twentieth century, however, her work was successfully recovered especially by feminist criticism, which is a paradox, as she was not an activist or a feminist herself. After its rescue from undeserved oblivion, *The Awakening* received the critical attention it deserved, and, consequently, gave rise to many interpretations. A unique, fin-de-siècle novel, it positions itself at the crossroad of many literary movements, with critics endeavouring to give it a definite label. Its protean nature, though, could not escape critical scrutiny. Nolan (2008:119) notices the novel's "sophisticated engagements with romanticism, transcendentalism, literary realism, naturalism and New Woman fiction", which prepare the ground for "the concerns of feminism and literary modernism".

A belated exercise in transcendentalism, especially the Whitmanian one (Bloom 2007), a protomodernist novel (Horner 2008), a book influenced by Impressionism and its techniques (Gilmore 1988), an example of psychological realism influenced to a certain degree by Maupassant (Showalter 2007, Nolan 2008), Chopin's little book continues to fascinate and fire up a battle of '-isms'. Other critics (cf. Bender 2007 and Joslin 2008) dealt with Chopin's (re)interpretation of naturalism and her dialogue or quarrel with Darwin's theories expressed in *The Descent of Man* and *Selection in Relation to Sex*. The present paper purposes itself to answer two interconnected questions: how does this generic mixture shape the ending of the novel and how does it influence our understanding of the ending?

2. *The Awakening* – Transcendentalism Meets Female Gothic

Many critical discussions focused on the rather unexpected ending; most specifically, they tried to solve the puzzle of Edna's death. Initially, when the book appeared, her suicide was seen as the right punishment for her transgressive and immoral behaviour. Later discussions saw Edna "as the victim of an oppressive society" (Wolkenfeld 1976:122), or "a solitary, defiant soul who stands out against the limitations that both nature and society place upon her" (Ringe 1976:206), thus her death becoming her only way out or the natural answer to a constraining society.

Gilbert (1983) makes a daring feminist reinterpretation of Aphrodite's myth, reading Edna's death as a mystical/metaphorical (re)birth. But such an interpretation glosses over the darker undertones of her death and ignores the social implications of such an extreme act. At the other end of the spectrum, Edna's death is seen as the defeat of the modern woman who cannot choose to be free without facing reprobation, or the only way out available to her newly awakened spirit who cannot go back to her former life (Gilmore 1988). In other words, Edna's death is the natural outcome of her rejection of two possible narrative threads: Madame Adèle Ratignolle's and Mademoiselle Reisz's. She refuses to conform to the codes of what was considered then acceptable behaviour, but she is not courageous enough to break completely free and be independent. Robert Treu (2000) puts forward a rather original interpretation, claiming that Edna did not commit suicide, as the text is too ambiguous to encourage such a drastic interpretation.

One of the '-isms' that favours a more optimistic reading of Edna's final act is Emerson's idealist philosophy. Harold Bloom sees *The Awakening* as mainly a transcendentalist novel, mostly influenced by Walt Whitman in its erotic perspective, "which is narcissistic and even autoerotic", as the "the sexual awakening that centers the novel involves a narcissistic self-investment that constitutes a new ego for the heroine" (Bloom 2007:1). Nevertheless, discovering oneself means the death of oneself since "she fails to see that her passion is for herself, and this error perhaps destroys her" (Bloom 2007:1). Bloom's interpretation is not farfetched, as it is in the sea, thus in nature, the transcendentalists' predilected place of self-discovery, that Edna discovers her erotic and sexualized self. The eroticising effects of water seduce the main heroine with its "whispering, clamouring, murmuring" (Chopin 2005:52) voice. After swimming in the ocean, she can feel "the first-felt throbbing of desire" (52). The experience is intensely physical, making her aware of her own body and, consequently, of her sexuality. Also, it is not by chance that the person who most encourages her to swim is Robert, later the object of her desire and the person responsible to a great extent for her sexual awakening.

However, it is in the ocean that Edna discovers her non-conformist self. Swimming away from the land, she swims away from society and rules, hence nature becomes an alternative place, a place of becoming. For Nolan (2008:124), the ocean empowers Edna as it reveals her natural instincts, thus playing "a key role in the assertion of an autonomous female self". It is "a site of freedom and possibility for the heroine" (Nolan 2008:125). The same liberating and hypnotic effect is exercised by Mademoiselle Reisz's music, which helps Edna discover her artistic self.

Following the transcendentalist interpretation, Edna's assumed suicide is a metaphorical rebirth, a return to the site of empowerment, to that alternative place which revealed her true self, the sea: "a heroic embrace of independence and a symbolic resurrection into myth" (Showalter 2007:22). Such a reading may be justified by the very lyrical tone of the passages describing the sea and its seductive power.

The voice of the sea is seductive; never ceasing, whispering, clamoring, murmuring, inviting the soul to wander for a spell in abysses of solitude; to lose itself in mazes of inward contemplation. The voice of the sea speaks to the soul. The touch of the sea is sensuous, enfolding the body in its soft, close embrace. (Chopin 2005:25)

The description of the sea calls to mind ‘the oceanic feeling’, a term coined by Romain Rolland and Sigmund Freud in an exchange of letters that started from the latter’s *The Future of an Illusion*. In his letter to Freud, Rolland (1927:36) describes this feeling as a religious one “totally independent of all dogma, all credo, all Church organization, all Sacred Books”. This mystical awareness very much influenced by Asian philosophy, as Rolland himself confesses, is reminiscent of the transcendentalist mystical reunion with nature. Therefore, Kate Chopin’s heroine, fed up with society and its strict rules, finds solace and possibly redemption in the embrace of the sea. A dogmatic religion would have certainly rejected her, thus the oneness with the universe becomes the only mystical feeling she can resort to. Such a transcendentalist reading draws on Kant’s ‘dynamically sublime’, as nature, and in this particular case, the ocean, raises

the forces of the soul above the height of vulgar commonplace, and [discovers] within us a power of resistance of quite another kind, which gives us courage to be able to measure ourselves against the seeming omnipotence of nature. (Kant 2007:91)

What Edna is seeking is a power above herself and the society she so much rejects now, a power that is not necessarily embodied by a Calvinistic God. A closer analysis of this interpretation has its flaws, nonetheless, since it forces Edna into the stereotype of the woman going back to mother nature that is eternally feminine. Although it avoids casting her into an Ophelia-like role, victim of men and love, it, however, forces her into the romantic cliché of the woman in tune with nature.

Freud takes on a more irreligious interpretation of ‘the oceanic feeling’, which he sees as a form of “limitless narcissism” associated with “infantile helplessness” (Freud 1962:19). A reading linking Freud’s take on the ‘oceanic feeling’ and Edna’s suicide is closer to Bloom’s, but instead of focusing on her erotic awakening or self, such an interpretation sees her ill-equipped to face her plight, thus she longs for an initial state, almost prenatal. Edna, who has rejected her maternal role, craves a pre-conscious, prenatal state of infantile comfort. A Freudian take on Edna’s succumbing to the ocean is thus less optimistic than the transcendental and the Rollandian readings.

Considering Chopin’s Calvinistic upbringing, another interpretation comes to mind, more pessimistic and closer to the fin-de-siècle mood of doom and gloom. Not many critics have analysed Kate Chopin’s work from a Dark Romantic or even from a Gothic perspective, one notable exception being Janet Beer and Avril Horner’s (2016) chapter on Southern Gothic and Kate Chopin. However, the two authors focus exclusively on postcolonial Gothic in the Louisiana setting, Chopin’s homeland and favourite narrative space. *The Awakening*, due to its main themes and seemingly feminist agenda is closer to the Female Gothic, “the work that women have done in the literary mode that, since the eighteenth century, we have called the Gothic” (Moers 1976:90). The term has been subject to extensive critical debate, but such a long discussion does not fall within the scope of this paper. Instead, the present article focuses more on the genre’s ability to accurately describe women’s plight in a patriarchal society, although many times through the metaphors of spectrality (ghosts, hauntings).

Though not a traditionally Gothic novel *par excellence*, and despite its avoidance of any supernatural elements, *The Awakening* features a woman who feels entrapped by her domestic and social role. In “‘The Haunting Idea’: Female Gothic Metaphors and Feminist Theory”, Diana Wallace (2009) analyses metaphors belonging to the Gothic paraphernalia used in 18th century legal writings which describe married women as “civilly dead” (Blackstone qtd. in Wallace 2009:31). A married woman had no civil presence or identity apart from her husband, being

completely engulfed by her husband's both legal and social identity. Even though the Creole society in which Edna grew is a bit more tolerant with women than 18th century and 19th century British society, she still feels a prisoner of her condition as both wife and mother. Thus, it would not be far-fetched to compare Edna's final struggle and self-annihilation with that of the female narrator from "The Yellow Wallpaper" (Gilman 2009). Though the ending of *The Awakening* is less twisted and violent than that of Gilman's story, it speaks of the same fear of entrapment in a strict society that has little to no tolerance for an artistic or sexual female self. The ocean as a site of the sublime, as it was envisaged by Romantic writers and philosophers, becomes 'the uncanny', 'unhomely' home for Edna. After her controversial novel had been published, Kate Chopin was also buried alive as a writer and turned into a barely audible, ghostly voice, later to be resurrected by feminist writers. Thus, both Kate Chopin and her controversial heroine share a similar fate, both having haunted the literary canon before their late recognition by critics and readers alike.

3. *The Awakening* – from Realism to Modernism

As stated in the beginning, Kate Chopin's novel was also read as an example of psychological realism or even naturalism. The transcendentalist or the romantic interpretative line is subtly subverted by the matter-of-fact voice of the narrator, who seems quite detached by the main protagonist at times:

In short, Mrs. Pontellier 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. This may seem like a ponderous weight of wisdom to descend upon the soul of a young woman of twenty-eight – perhaps more wisdom than the Holy Ghost is usually pleased to vouchsafe to any woman. (Chopin 2005:25)

Words such as, "her position in the universe", "her relations as an individual to the world within" and the obvious irony at the end mark a clear departure from transcendentalism, with Kate Chopin adopting an almost 'scientific' voice. Even though the writer is clearly indebted to Walt Whitman, whose lyrics she included in the novel in "a moment of sexual tension", Nolan (2008:130) sees Edna's falling asleep while reading Emerson's lyrics as an ironic insight into the transcendentalists' incapacity of understanding a woman's experience. Kate Chopin might be indirectly suggesting that transcendentalism is better suited to mirror the awakening and the transformation of the 'male' self, as it was envisaged by the movement's main prophets: Emerson, Thoreau and Whitman.

Furthermore, the highly 'romantic' setting of the erotic awakening only frames the novel (it starts and ends Chopin's book), the rest being dedicated to her everyday city life and marriage. The narrator adopts an almost schizophrenic voice, oscillating between satire and lyricism. Thus, the ironic voice of realism is preferred when scenes of the Pontelliers' marriage are depicted. It is also chosen to deconstruct Edna's romantic passion for Robert. As Edna tries to gain her freedom, she ironically relies on Robert's love to save her from the prison of her marriage. But Robert, apparently a romantic hero, audacious and adventurous, is, nonetheless, part of the same patriarchal society. He cannot freely love Edna, unless he asks Mr. Pontellier for permission; hence he assumes that her husband owns her. Edna escapes her marriage but she finds it difficult to escape this final illusion – romantic love. Katherine Mansfield is the one to draw attention to the inherent dangers of such an illusory notion.

It is the hopelessly insipid doctrine that love is the only thing in the world, taught, hammered into women, from generation to generation, which hampers us so cruelly. We must get rid of that bogey—and then, then comes the opportunity of happiness and freedom. (Mansfield 1977:35-36)

Following such an interpretation, Edna, disillusioned, commits suicide as she realizes her limited options. Without Robert, she is left with only two possibilities: to go back to “domestic captivity” or to become a free-lover and thus “suffer social and self-castigation” (Black 2007:113).

Consistent with this interpretation and at odds with transcendentalism, there is also Kate Chopin’s use of naturalistic elements and her belief in ‘nature’ as a deterministic force in conditioning behaviour and, hence, dictating our fate. This view on life comes as no surprise, considering Chopin’s Calvinistic upbringing. This ‘nature’ is different from the transcendentalist, mystical one, it is a relentless Darwinian force; Chopin read Darwin, whose theories she both challenged and accepted (Bender 2007:89). One epiphany she experiences that has nothing to do with Romanticism is when she sees her friend Adele giving birth. For the first time ever, Edna is almost disgusted with this “little new life”, seeing the futility of yet another soul added to the “multitude of souls that come and go” (Chopin 2005:186). Although she undoubtedly loves her own children, she nonetheless sees them as “antagonists” (Chopin 2005:196).

For Bloom, this mixture between naturalism and transcendentalism is what makes the novel unique, but it also constitutes its formal weakness (Bloom 2007:2). What Bloom fails to see is the existence of a third “-ism”: *The Awakening* is Kate Chopin’s ‘coup d’état’, her break with tradition, using the tools of that very tradition (much like Edna who throws a decadent party before moving out from her marital house, thus squandering her husband’s money). As Showalter aptly notices, Chopin’s novel – as its title also suggests – is

about a process rather than a program, about a passage rather than a destination ... is a transitional female fiction of the fin-de-siècle, a narrative of and about the passage from the homosocial women’s culture and literature of the nineteenth century to the heterosexual fiction of modernism. (Showalter 2007:16)

Edna is in search of her identity but not in a bildungsroman, realist manner, as she is more concerned with her consciousness and with a new intellectual and bodily awareness.

What might appear initially a realist novel turns realism against itself, since Edna, a woman, even an artist, is searching for a voice, which finds its unique expression in the experimentation and subjectivity encouraged by modernist writers. Giving voice to Edna’s dreams and inner turmoil results in a violation of the contemporary principles of representation: “Although *The Awakening* is a realist novel in many respects, it mounts a series of challenges to the ideology of representation, and it violates contemporary aesthetic standards both in what it dares to say and how it tells the story” (Gilmore 1988:68). Therefore, Chopin’s novel tackles both modernist themes and narrative techniques.

Amy Kaplan (1992:1) argues that realism is meant to serve patriarchy, being mainly “a fictional deceit” which tries to give “an official version of the ordinary”. As a consequence, ‘feminine’ writing has to undermine it, by using alternative, anti-realistic genres such as fantasy, dystopia, or utopia. For Kate Chopin, that alternative voice took the form of a precocious modernism that places a woman’s consciousness and intimate experience at the heart of her text. She used that newly found voice to mark what Henry James identified in 1892 as

the growing divorce between the American woman (with her comparative leisure, culture, grace, social instincts, artistic ambition) and the male American immersed in the ferocity of business, with no time for any but the most sordid interests, purely commercial, professional, democratic and political. This divorce is rapidly becoming a gulf. (James qtd. in Martin 1988:44)

Henry James’ words reflect to a certain degree Edna’s condition, but they still envision masculinity and femininity as two opposing genders, prisoners of the same stereotypical modes of thinking: leisure, culture and grace vs. business, politics and profession. Therefore, I would

argue that Chopin transcends all these socially constructed dichotomies, her novel becoming an expression of the modernists' frustration with strict Victorian gender conventions.

Obvious features pertaining to modernism (both formal and content-related) punctuate the text: lyrical style coupled with a fragmented narrative, short episodic chapters and an almost circular pattern. Chopin practically 'plagiarizes' herself in the end, as she reiterates the lyrical description of the sea using the same words "the voice of the sea is seductive, never ceasing, whispering, clamoring, murmuring..." (Chopin 2005:25, 184). The plot advancement through the repetition of motifs and images (the sea, Edna swimming, Frédéric Chopin's music) and the sudden transition from one chapter to another, they both disrupt the realistic plot based almost entirely on cause and effect. Due to the "impressionistic rhythm of epiphany and mood" (Showalter 2007:15), the atmosphere created and the sensory imagery pervading the more lyrical chapters Chopin's novel has been often compared to an impressionistic painting (Gilmore 1988, Showalter 2007). Another undeniably modernist feature is the focus on the inner consciousness of the main female character and on the reality of her mind, allowed by the use of a selective omniscient point of view. Thematically speaking, the bold treatment of female sexuality (Edna's non-religious, but sexual awakening), the emphasis on her revolt against Victorian society rules and norms, her depiction as a modern *flâneur*, a casual wanderer who walks the streets of New Orleans are all markers of a precocious modernism.

Although the title of the novel is brimming with positive connotations, the subtitle "A Solitary Soul" announces a different story. Kate Chopin attributed her literary awakening to Maupassant who, though considered a realist writer, had a significant impact on French modernism. From the onset, his influence is quite obvious. Her translation of his short story "Solitude" is echoed in the last chapter when Edna has the revelation of the impermanence of human relations and of our inescapable loneliness:

There was no human being she wanted near her except Robert; and she even realized that the day would come when he, too, and the thought of him would melt out of her existence, leaving her alone. (Chopin 2005:195)

We are always alone. I have dragged you out into the night in the vain hope of a moment's escape from the horrible solitude which overpowers me. But what is the use! I speak and you answer me, and still each of us is alone; side by side but alone. (Maupassant qtd. in Showalter 2007:33)

Both passages express the same *fin-de-siècle angst* encountered in Marlow's famous words: "We live as we dream—alone" (Conrad 1995:55). Chopin's painful, almost Nietzschean insight into the human condition, often reiterated by modernist fiction, becomes obvious when Edna attends to her friend, Adèle, giving birth: "With an inward agony, with a flaming, outspoken revolt against the ways of Nature, she witnessed the scene of torture" (Chopin 2005:187). This scene comes immediately after her last encounter with Robert and casts a shadow over their passionate, yet unconsummated moment.

4. Conclusion

With Edna, Kate Chopin subverts 'the old stable ego' of the realist character; Mrs. Pontellier is prone to "contradictory impulses" and to inexplicable mood swings. She alternates between moments of ecstasy or "intoxication" and depression, melancholy, ennui or anguish. Edna is "a bundle of conflicting desires and choices" (Horner 2008:143-144). Her contradictory and elusive nature is consistent with the ending which should be interpreted in a modernist key as an open one – open to many interpretations. Such an ending gives power to the 'active' readers, by involving them even deeper into the interpretative process. This modernist reading of the ending does not exclude the others (the naturalistic or transcendental interpretations) since they are still valid possibilities. But if interpreted exclusively through these lenses, we would not

do justice to such a daring novel. Can we safely assume that Edna's death is either the direct result of her failure to adapt or a metaphorical re-birth? Both interpretations are mutually exclusive and somehow limiting. Throughout the book, Edna dies many deaths and faces many 'resurrections': the death of the housewife and of nurturing mother and the (re)birth of a sexualized self and of an artist, but also the awakening of a new consciousness, not necessarily feminine, attuned to the 'fin-de-siècle malaise'.

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