

A Solitary Soul: A Psychoanalytical Reading of Edna's Identification in *The Awakening*

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Abstract

This thesis attempts to interpret the failed self-identification of Edna, the protagonist in *The Awakening* by applying the Lacanian theories of the Mirror Stage and the identification of subjectivity. By dissecting Edna's identity formation into two stages: no clear self-identification and refusal to identify with typical female subject Adele, this thesis tries to demonstrate the ego of Edna is still an innocent and immature child and her death is an inevitable but brave choice in the patriarchal society.

Keywords

Edna; identity; the Imaginary Order; subjectivity.

1. Introduction

Edna is the protagonist in Kate Chopin's *The Awakening*, who refuses to be integrated into the existing order and tries to seek her own identity, thus suffering the conflict between the individual autonomy and social conformity, and resorts to death at last. Considerable commentary as well as many controversies over her has been elicited among literary critics since the publication of *The Awakening* in 1899.

At the very beginning, the book was described as "morbid", "essentially vulgar" (170). And Edna was criticized for her violation of the codes and modes in the 19th century. In recent years, because of the change of the ideological concerns, some critics tend to interpret it as a feminist novel and speak highly of the strong mind and independence of Edna as she breaks away from the conventional feminine roles of wife and mother and tries to seek her own identity. Yet there are still some negative comments. "Edna's reaching out to others is either brief and transitory (as with Adele

and the children) or colored by a selfish motive (as with Robert)" (1972:586). From my perspective, these readings pay much attention to Edna's outward expression, but don't go deep into the internal factors that contribute to it. Psychoanalytical methodology thus is very essential to find out the internal factors of Edna's suicide and achieve an incisive interpretation of her.

2. Edna's Failure in Self-identification

2.1. The Lacanian theory on formation of subjectivity

The Primary Identification happens in the Imaginary Order, more specific, the Mirror Stage, during which period the child first perceives his or her image in the mirror or metaphorically sees himself or herself in his or her mother's image. In the Imaginary Order, the child delights in the unification with his or her mother or the imaginary self, while in the Symbolic Order, his or her father will disrupt the harmony and stands between him or her and his or her mother. The Symbolic Order is a patriarchal order per se, in which the father represents culture norms and social laws and enforces these cultural rules by threatening to castrate the child if he or she does not obey. To avoid being castrated by the father and to establish social subjectivity, a child

has to go through the Secondary Identification in the Symbolic Order by subjecting to the culture norms and language principles in the patriarchal order and internalizing the social rules outside into the “ego-ideal”.

2.2. Failure in the primary identification

As for Edna’s emerging character, Chopin has provided significant guidelines: “At a very early period she had apprehended instinctively the dual life—that outward existence which conforms, the inward life which questions” (32). Back to the childhood of Edna therefore would be an efficient way to understand the formation of her character and the cause of her behavior. Born in a sound old Presbyterian Kentucky stock, Edna lost her mother at a very young age and thus was raised up with her two sisters by their father, a hypocritical Colonel who asserts that “Authority, coercion are what is needed” (91) and believes that the only way to manage a wife is to put his foot good and hard. Brought up in such a family, Edna is self-contained and reserved. “Even as a child she has lived her own small life within herself” (32), as the writer suggests.

The loss of mother not only made Edna suffer during her childhood, but also removed the model and Primary Identification figure of Edna. The imperious and authoritarian father Edna had no warm or deep attachment to didn’t have any positive influence on her self-identification or give her any affirmative sign when she grew up. And even the practical and cold sister Margaret never offered a substitute object for feminine identification. In consequence, Edna doesn’t complete the Primary Identification as a result of her no model to identify with in the Mirror Stage, which leads to a negative impact on the development of Edna’s ego.

3. Refusal to Establish the Female Subjectivity

3.1. “Wedding is one of the most lamentable spectacles on earth”

When reproached by her husband for her inattention and habitual neglect of the children, Edna “said nothing” (24) and “refused to answer her husband” (24). Sitting there, an “indescribable” (25) oppression generated in her consciousness. Trapped in the patriarchal society, Edna is surely unable to vocalize her dissatisfactions or name her desires because the registers available to her are unsuitable for that purpose.

“If words shape desires, those who control which registers we use to express ourselves delimit what is “desirable” (1995:37). In Creole society, a patriarchal society, language is traditionally controlled by men, through which men indirectly established their power over women. By dominating language principles, men decide what a woman can desire, what a woman can express, and what desires a woman can name.

Before her awakening, Edna is one of the women who are confined to the devalued registers of “home and hearth”. She is ill-equipped with the language to resist the will of her husband, who is the maker of the principles. What Edna can talk about is the topics that Creole women talk—their childbirth, their children and their family, which are available in their registers.

With the budding of Edna’s awakening, she began to refuse the language principles in the patriarchal society. When her husband asked her to go to bed, she refused his request, which was the first time she didn’t submit to his command. Later she overtly “returned” to her husband “You used to think the cook was a treasure” (71) when he complained the fish was scorched. Disobedience to the words of her husband actually is her attacking to the patriarchal society. She even said to her husband “wedding is one of the most lamentable spectacles on earth” (86) when she refused to go to the wedding of her sisters. Being in a society where marriage was deemed as the holiest and happiest thing for a woman, Edna’s words are the obvious blasphemy against social conformity.

In addition to resistance against her husband, Edna also became self-assertive and learned to give voice to her discontent and desires. She once told Madame Ratignolle that “she would never

sacrifice herself for her children, or for any one" (67), which initiated a rather heated argument between the two. As a mother-woman, Madame Ratignolle considered idolizing her children as the paramount mission of a woman. As she maintains "a woman who would give her life for her children could do no more than that—your Bible tells you so" (67). Edna's speech is thus definitely unacceptable from the perspective of Madame Ratignolle. When Robert came from Mexico, responding to Robert's assertion that he stayed away from her because she belongs to her husband, Edna voiced her strongest resistance to the patriarchal society "I am no longer one of Mr. Pontellier's possessions to dispose of or not. I give myself where I choose" (128). By using male language to assert her own power, she denies the notions of male superiority and ownership upon which patriarchal rests.

It is not difficult to see Edna's rebellion and resistance increasingly get intensified in the process of her awakening. From silence to resistance, Edna learned to assert her own desires and vocalize her discontent. But at the same time, this is also a process that she gradually broke with the Symbolic Order due to her refusal to submit to the language rules in the Symbolic Order.

3.2. "I am going to move away from my house"

In the first pages of the novel, when the rebellious seed hasn't sprouted in Edna, she seems outwardly submissive and her marital relationship also appears harmonious. Reminding her husband of the umbrella when he goes out and asking him whether he would come back to dinner, Edna fulfills a wife's obligations quite well in appearance. And when she comes back from the beach and reaches her husband for her rings, the description suggests that the relationship of the couple seems rather harmonious as if there is tacit understanding between the two.

And in order not to appear "unamiable and uninterested" (27) among the women who are busy preparing the winter night garments, Edna brought forth newspapers and cut a pattern of the impervious garment. Though readers are informed that in her nature, Edna is "quite at rest" concerning the material needs of her children, Edna actually tried to conform to the social norms in appearance.

However, with the intensification of the conflict between the external values and the internal self, Edna chose to resist the patriarchal laws. Taking off the rings for her fingers, stamping her heel upon it and striving to crush it was her resistance against the patriarchal laws. She cancelled her reception day, which "had been the programmed which Mrs. Pontellier had religiously followed since her marriage" (69). Her behavior irritated her husband at last. "'The Misses Delasidas. I worked a big deal in futures for their father this morning', 'you can't afford to snub Mrs. Belthrop. Why, Belthrop could buy and sell us ten times over. His business is worth a good, round sum to me'". (71) From the complaints of Mr. Pontellier, we can see such a reception actually means a lot for his business. As Mr. Pontellier suggests, a wife's social activities are supposed to do some help to her husband's business. Taking good care of the house and establishing some beneficial social connections are what a good wife ought to do. However, Edna's abolishing the reception day shows her serious dereliction of her duty as a wife, which is her overt challenge to the patriarchal law.

Family for Madame Ratignolle is where she wants to devote all herself to, while for Edna is a cage that she struggles to escape from. When she got a glimpse of the domestic harmony of Madame Ratignolle's family, all Edna saw is "an appalling and hopeless ennui" (76). She even felt a pity for Ratignolle's "colorless existence, which never uplifted its possessor beyond the religion of the blind contentment" (76). Moving away from the house can be called Edna's strongest rebellion against the external law. As a married woman, house is her only permitted province, where women's any interests and activities mustn't go beyond. Edna's abandonment of the house is actually her refusal to continue to take the responsibility as a wife and mother. She is also asserting her independence by refusing to live in the house offered by her husband.

Moving away to the house keeps Edna forever away from the Symbolic Order, for she disobeys the inviolable laws in the patriarchal society—a woman should be family-centered.

No respect to the marriage, neglect the duty of a wife, inattention to the children and abandonment of her family, Edna fails to be a good wife and mother she is supposed to perform. Although Madame Ratignolle, the representative of the new value system, serves as a model of female subject for Edna, with the awakening of Edna, she refuses to identify herself with the model or even the new value system. Therefore Edna fails to establish her female subjectivity and thus to enter into the Symbolic Order.

4. Conclusion

Throughout the life of Edna, she is alone. The loss of mother caused her unfortunate childhood. Imperious father and indifferent sisters offer no affirmative impact in her Primary Identification. According to Emerson's theory, "it is through the eyes that these worlds meet and influence each other, the outer world perceived and colored by the unique nature and lies within, and the inner world brought to its self-awareness by the influences that enter from the world without" (1972:582). Being solitary and alone, Edna couldn't receive any influence from the outer world. When she grows up, she is still not endowed with the ability to form a true and long relationship with another, thus staying maladjusted to the outside world. Besides, with her self-discovery, she flatly refused the rules and values from the outer world and shuts the door to the Symbolic Order. She forever isolates herself from the suffocating patriarchal society and symbolically goes to the beginning of her life—the womb of her mother by committing suicide, in which she again becomes a child of a mother instead of the mother of a child.

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