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Edna's Failure to Find Her Female Role in Kate Chopin's *The Awakening*

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Kate Chopin is known for writing about women and their struggles in patriarchal society. In her three works *The Awakening*, “A Point at Issue” and “Wiser than a God”, she portrays women who have taken on different types of female roles. Per Seyersted calls these roles the “patriarchal woman”, which I choose to exemplify by Mme. Ratignolle from *The Awakening*, the “modern woman,” who Seyersted exemplifies by Eleanor from “A Point of Issue,” and the “emancipated woman,” who Seyersted exemplifies by Paula from “Wiser than a God” (Seyersted 102-105). One can say that these women have accepted and internalized a female role in society, by either following the rules of patriarchal society or breaking them. Edna, the protagonist of *The Awakening*, is a woman in search of her female identity. She is uncomfortable in her role as the “patriarchal woman” and has trouble obtaining either of the other two roles. This essay will focus on Edna’s inability to find her female role. Comparing her to the three other types of women in Chopin’s works, I will show why she cannot conform to any one of these roles, and how the resulting suicide is a conscious choice very much in character with Chopin’s portrayal of her.

To understand Edna’s role in society and that of the women whom she is compared to one must first know what a patriarchal society is and what it means to internalize this system. Patriarchal society can be defined “as any culture that privileges men by promoting traditional gender roles” (Tyson 83). The word patriarchy literally means “rule of the father” (Tierney 1048) and in patriarchal society men control women. Lois Tyson explains that “patriarchy continually exerts forces that undermine women’s self-confidence and assertiveness, then points to the absence of these qualities as proof that women are naturally, and therefore correctly, self-effacing and submissive” (85). The main purpose of patriarchal society is to place the woman in a submissive role, which allows for the man to control her more easily. Women as well as men have roles they have to play in patriarchal society. The male role is to be strong, and to provide for his family as the head of the household. He is expected to always succeed because “men are not permitted to fail at anything they try because failure in any domain implies failure in one’s manhood” (Tyson 86). Anything that can be regarded as feminine a man should avoid because “whenever patriarchy wants to undermine a behavior, it portrays that behavior as feminine” (Tyson 87). In this manner patriarchal society places the woman in an inferior position to the man and gives her a submissive role, which means she is the one who takes care of the man, the children and the household. A woman’s greatest wish should be to marry and have children, and she should not want to partake in any business involving finances, meaning she should not be able to take care of herself financially. Finally, in order to be a “‘good’ woman [she] is expected to find

sex frightening and disgusting” (Tyson 89). To reach these patriarchal goals the “male power [must insinuate] itself into the psyche of women, teaching them to collaborate in defining themselves as subordinate to, and dependent on, men” (Tierney 1048). These patriarchal norms are often internalized from childhood, which makes it very difficult for a woman to take on any other role. To internalize means “to make internal, personal, or subjective,” or “to take in and make an integral part of one’s attitudes or beliefs” (“Internalization”).

Internalization affects how a person interprets the norms and rules existing in society. This internalization can be either forced on a person from childhood or learnt as an adult. As a result, internalization can be both part of a general cultural behavior or a self-taught behavior.

Patriarchal societies, however, have differences depending on location and time period. Chopin wrote her works during the late 19th century and she wrote mainly about the American south. Edna in *The Awakening* grows up in Kentucky and then moves to New Orleans where she encounters a different type of behavior than what she is used to from her childhood. The Creole way of interaction is much more physical, with touching and hugging, something she is not used to from her upbringing. Edna is affected to some degree by this different behavior and finds that she “loosen a little the mantle of reserve that had always enveloped her” (Chopin 25). Somewhat ironically she is also very influenced and affected by Adele Ratignolle, the “patriarchal” woman (Chopin 25), who is very affectionate and flirtatious when she interacts with others, including Edna. This exposure to a more open and physically accepting society shows Edna a different way of acting than what she is used to. She starts to allow her friends to touch her, something that she had not previously done, not in such a manner anyway. Although Edna is influenced by this more sensuous way of behavior, it does not change her understanding of the roles that men and women should have. The openness of the characters Edna encounters may be confusing to her because she is not used to the loving way they act, but it is obvious that she is not confused about the patriarchal rules. Therefore one can say that the difference between Edna’s previous society and her new one lies in the personal interaction between people and not in the patriarchal norms as such. If one is also to take into account the time period in which Chopin wrote, one can conclude that these patriarchal rules and norms were much stricter then than they are today. Female emancipation was frowned upon during this time and Chopin’s novel received criticism for its sexual nature and its theme of female emancipation (see Fox-Genovese). However, Edna receives little or no encouragement from any of the other characters in the novel and the general feeling is that emancipation is something negative.

As mentioned earlier, the three female roles that I will compare Edna to are defined by Seyersted in his book *Kate Chopin: A Critical Biography*. First we have the role of the “patriarchal woman” who follows the rules of patriarchal society. She is submissive and takes care of her family. Seyersted explains that “[t]he female’s capital is her body and her innocence, and she should be attractive and playful enough for the man to want her” and “she should eagerly welcome the ‘sanctity of motherhood’” (103). Mme. Ratignolle in *The Awakening* personifies these views; she is the ultimate mother and wife and cherishes her female role. Secondly, there is the role of the “modern woman” who wants a relationship based on equality with her husband. Seyersted explains her as the woman “who insists on being a subject and a man’s equal, but who cooperates with the male rather than fighting him” (105). He continues to explain that the modern woman does not mind getting married, but that she often keeps her own last name instead of taking the husband’s, since taking on his name is a “sign of [his] ownership” (105) that the modern woman cannot accept. The modern woman is not owned like her patriarchal sister but has an agreement with her spouse, allowing for both to keep their own personality and individuality, and where neither one should need to change their desired path of “life work” (Seyersted 105) to please the other. They have an agreement and an understanding, and all decisions are discussed and made together. This female role is characterized by Eleanor from Chopin’s “A Point of Issue”. Lastly there is the role of the “emancipated woman”. Seyersted refers to Simone de Beauvoir to explain this role: “a female who ‘wants to be active, a taker, and refuses the passivity man means to impose on her’” (105). She is a woman “who attempts to achieve an existentialist authenticity through making a conscious choice, giving her own laws, realizing her essence, and making her own destiny” (Seyersted 105). The “emancipated woman” consciously resists the male-dominated society by not giving up anything to please a man. She is explained as someone who often fights the male, in opposition to the modern woman. The “emancipated” woman is characterized by Chopin’s heroine Paula in “Wiser than a God”. Mme. Ratignolle, Eleanor and Paula have all internalized one of the female roles that Seyersted defines and these are the characters and roles that Edna will be compared to.

Living by her father’s rules as a child and young woman, Edna learns that patriarchal rules must be followed. Her father’s view of how a woman should be handled is shown in a conversation he has with Mr. Pontellier after a short visit: “‘You are too lenient, too lenient by far, Léonce,’ asserted the Colonel. ‘Authority, coercion are what is needed. Put your foot down good and hard; the only way to manage a wife. Take my word for it’” (Chopin 102). Edna’s father is also very upset at Edna for not coming to her sister’s wedding, and he

tells her that she is a very bad woman and sister. These passages show that Edna's father has always been a very strict man who believes in women following the rules that society has set up for them. His oppression also seems to have been the reason for Edna's mother's death, which only adds to the idea that the Colonel is a firm believer of the patriarchal system and that he has enforced these beliefs upon his daughter throughout her childhood.

When Edna marries, she chooses the older Mr. Pontellier because she believes he has a different view on how a woman should be treated in a relationship. She also wants to defy her father. Leonce is a Catholic, which upsets her father very much. Edna is hoping for a marriage of equality and thinks that "there was a sympathy of thought and taste between them [...] He pleased her; his absolute devotion flattered her" (Chopin 31). Unfortunately Edna has been mistaken in thinking that Leonce was different from her father. Instead he turns out to also be a strong believer in patriarchal society, and her attempt to marry a man who would offer her a marriage of equality and a sense of freedom fails. She is again with a man who rules her, just like her father. The narrator tells us that as "Edna found herself face to face with realities. She grew fond of her husband" (Chopin 31), and decides to do what is expected of her instead of following her desires. In accordance with patriarchal beliefs, she denies her own sexuality and decides that it is not necessary in her life. Referring to Edna's previous infatuations, Lee R. Edwards writes that "the warmth aroused by these men [...] could never blaze in reality; her marriage to Léonce signals her acceptance of the chilly deadliness of life" (282). As Edwards observes, Edna casts herself aside completely and totally conforms to the patriarchal rules. She has two children with her husband and she follows "the programme" (Chopin 74) Mr. Pontellier has designed, with social events, taking care of the household, her children and her husband. She buries her thoughts and feelings deep within herself.

However, it soon becomes obvious that Edna has a very hard time hiding her true feelings and that she is very uncomfortable trying to be a "mother-woman" (Chopin 18). Mr. Pontellier does not feel that Edna is successfully fulfilling her duties as a mother and wife: "He reproached his wife with her inattention, her habitual neglect of the children. If it was not a mother's place to look after children, whose on earth was it?" (Chopin 15). By this statement Mr. Pontellier shows his strong patriarchal beliefs, which define women "as uniquely, sometimes solely, suited for bearing and raising children" (Tierney 1049). He also thinks "it very discouraging that his wife, who was the sole object of his existence, evinced so little interest in things which concerned him, and valued so little his conversation" (Chopin 14). It becomes more and more obvious that Edna is very unhappy with her life. She is not completely devoted to her husband and her children, but instead finds herself misplaced in her

female role since she is constantly failing in her female duties. Her unhappiness can be seen by her nightly tears: “She could not have told why she was crying. Such experiences as the foregoing were not uncommon in her married life” (Chopin 15-16). Edna has always had trouble internalizing the “patriarchal woman’s” qualities and as a result she now has a hard time playing the role of a submissive woman.

If one compares Edna to Adèle Ratignolle, who is described as the “embodiment of every womanly grace and charm” (Chopin 18), it becomes evident that she does not accept her role as a mother and wife. If one looks at the description Seyersted gives of the “patriarchal woman” Mme. Ratignolle very much embodies this female role. The narrator describes her as the ultimate “mother-woman” (Chopin 18) and Edna sees this kind of women everywhere as she is visiting the summer resort of Grande Isle. These women, according to the narrator, “idolized their children, worshiped their husbands, and esteemed it a holy privilege to efface themselves as individuals and grow wings as ministering angels” (Chopin 18). What Edna sees in these women, and especially in Mme. Ratignolle, can only be explained as patriarchal society at work.

In Mme. Ratignolle Edna sees a woman who very much enjoys being a wife and mother and who is happy with her position. When she visits the pregnant Mme. Ratignolle and her husband, she finds a couple who are in perfect understanding when it comes to their roles in the marriage. Mme. Ratignolle’s contentment and happiness as a mother and wife are shown by her actions towards her children and her husband. She is very excited about being pregnant yet again and spends all her leisure time sewing winter clothing for her children. When her children later come over to her she immediately gives them her full attention, she even carries her youngest child although “as everybody well knew, the doctor had forbidden her to lift so much as a pin!” (Chopin 24). She also has a never-ending interest in her husband which she shows during Edna’s dinner visit. When Mr. Ratignolle spoke “[h]is wife was keenly interested in everything he said, laying down her fork the better to listen” (Chopin 82). Adèle is a devoted mother and wife constantly aware of her husband and children’s needs and she happily takes on her female duties, effacing her own needs.

But While Edna catches a “little glimpse of domestic harmony” (Chopin 82), which does not exist in her own marriage, she finds it disturbing and even appalling. She only feels “pity for the colorless existence which never uplifted its possessor beyond the region of blind contentment” (Chopin 82). This statement shows her true feelings about her role as a submissive wife and mother. In contrast to Mme. Ratignolle’s apparent contentment in taking care of husband and children, Edna finds her actions strange. She may be attached to her

children but not to the extent that Mme. Ratignolle is; she is instead “fond of her children in an uneven, impulsive way” (Chopin 32). Edna is portrayed as a non-believer in the patriarchal society and her husband reproaches her for not successfully fulfilling her duties as a mother and wife. She has very little to talk to her husband about and that is why she finds Mme. Ratignolle suggestion to spend more time with him absurd: “We wouldn’t have anything to say to each other” (Chopin 99). Edna and her husband do not share the same beliefs when it comes to a woman’s role and therefore they do not have the domestic harmony that exists in Mme. Ratignolle and her husband’s relationship.

The problem that Edna encounters with the rules of patriarchal society is that she as a woman should have no ideas and thoughts of her own, but instead be totally devoted to the needs of her husband and children. Janet Beer writes that “All Chopin’s unhappily married women are in revolt against endings, against the idea of them as finished or completed in the act of marriage” (44). Chopin portrays Edna as this unhappily married woman who is not willing to give up her own emotional life as requested by patriarchal norms. She tries to explain her feelings to Mme. Ratignolle by saying that “I wouldn’t give myself” (Chopin 70). While she would not mind giving up money, comfort and even her own life if that would make her children and husband happy, but she cannot accept that “they possess her, body and soul” (Chopin 160).

It is during her visit at Grande Isle that Edna finally comes to realize that she cannot accept being a “patriarchal woman”. When Mr. Pontellier tells her to come inside and go to bed although she does not want to she starts to resist:

Another time she would have gone in at his request. She would, through habit, have yielded to his desire; not with any sense of submission or obedience to his compelling wishes, but unthinkingly, as we walk, move, sit, go through the daily treadmill of the life which has been portioned out to us. (Chopin 48)

Until this point, Edna has done what she felt was expected of her since childhood. She had been conditioned by her father to follow the rules of patriarchal society and had accepted her position as wife and mother. Her failure to marry a man interested in a marriage of equality has made her believe that it would be easier to simply conform. But she neither can nor will conform to her husband’s will any more. What has happened is that she sees herself acting just like the many mother-women residing on Grande Isle that summer, taking care of husband and children, and she does not like what she sees. She feels pity for these women and

their ability to totally efface themselves. Edna therefore finds (surprisingly even to herself at first) that she must resist:

She perceived that her will had blazed up, stubborn and resistant. She could not at that moment have done other than denied and resisted. She wondered if her husband had ever spoken to her like that before, and if she had submitted to his command. Of course she had; she remembered that she had. But could not realize why or how she should have yielded, feeling the way she then did. (Chopin 49)

For the first time, she is really defying her husband, just like she once defied her father by marrying a man he did not approve of. She again feels the need to be the kind of woman that she chooses to be, and feels that reality is again coming back to her as she awakens. Todd McGowan writes about Edna's moment of realization: "This encounter makes the role of wife visible to her, for the first time, as a role she has chosen—and is choosing—and it is the engine behind Edna's attempt to refuse this role, precipitating her first defiance of Leoncé" (53). McGowan explains Edna's realization in a very accurate way, since she has indeed chosen to conform to a role she does not really believe in. She continues to defy her husband and "[s]he began to do as she liked and feel as she liked" (Chopin 82). Awakening, she starts to show her discontent in not being in the kind of relationship that she desires, and her unhappiness in having accepted the role of the patriarchal woman that she resents.

The kind of relationship that Edna wants is the kind that the "modern" woman aims for, one of equality. Edna's inability to take on the role of the modern woman is due to choices she made previous to the actual marriage, and these are easier to see if they are compared to Eleanor's path towards marriage in Chopin's "A Point at Issue". Eleanor is portrayed as a woman who has "chosen to diverge from the beaten walks of Plymdeledom" (Chopin, "A Point at Issue" 162), meaning that she is a woman that knows what she wants out of life and has chosen a path that is different from that of most women in her society. She will not let anyone take her individuality and intellect away, and is lucky when she meets Professor Faraday, who is a man that appreciates these qualities in a woman. These two very much enjoy each other's company and have long discussions about many different aspects in life. They come to the agreement that "[m]arriage was to be a form, that while fixing legally their relation to each other, was in no wise to touch the individuality of either; that was to be preserved intact. Each was to remain a free intergral of humanity, responsible to no dominating exactions of so-called marriage laws" (Chopin, "A Point at Issue" 164-65). This

passage shows that there is an explicit understanding and a conversation previous to marriage that clarifies the needs and wants of both. For Eleanor, “[m]arriage, which marks too often the closing period of a woman’s intellectual existence, was to be in her case the open portal through which she might seek the embellishment that her strong, graceful mentality deserved” (Chopin “A Point at Issue” 165). Marriage would in her case be an institution in which she is allowed to develop her needs and wants while still being married to a man she loves.

One explanation as to why Edna fails to end up in the kind of relationship that she desires may be that she is portrayed as impulsive and passionate compared to the more realistic Eleanor. Proof of this can be found in how Chopin portrays Edna’s behaviors as a child, which is shown when she is talking to Mme. Ratignolle about her childhood. She explains that “I was a little unthinking child in those days, just following a misleading impulse without question” (Chopin 29). What Edna is explaining is why she had run away from church as a child, but it shows how Chopin wants to portray her as someone who has seen herself as unthinking and impulsive and now wants to change. The description of the men who Edna had been in love with during her childhood also makes it clear that she was indeed an unrealistic child. This is seen in the love she had for a great tragedian she admired from afar, talking about him constantly with her friends and in secret picking up his photo in a frame and “[kissing] the cold glass passionately” (Chopin 31). Chopin is showing us a woman who used to believe in dreams and hopes. Edna is not much for discussing her actual feelings and finding out the reality of a situation. When she meets Leonce, she hopes that they have the same beliefs when it comes to marriage instead of actually finding out if this is the case. Eleanor, on the other hand, knows exactly what she wants before she enters marriage and since she is portrayed as a very rational being she also makes sure that the man she is going to marry is exactly what she wants. Edna instead imagines that because Leonce loves and adores her, and shares some of her ideas he will also share her views on how a woman’s role in marriage should be. Edna has failed to enter a marriage of equality because she was not clear about her wants and needs from the beginning, and only saw the short term benefits of angering and getting away from her father. There is no way that she can have the kind of relationship that Eleanor has with her professor.

With the realization that she is failing as a “patriarchal woman” and that in her marriage to Leonce she can never be a “modern woman”, Edna finds that she has only one choice left and that is to break free from her patriarchal role and embark on emancipation. The process towards emancipation begins on Grande Isle where she starts to shed many of the patriarchal rules which she has followed. In the beginning, she is barely aware of her own

change: “She could only realize that she herself—her present self—was in some way different from her other self” (Chopin 61). The first action she takes on her new path is to ask Robert Lebrun to come to her and go with her to *Cheneiere* for mass. She has never done this before, just like she has never disobeyed her husband before. Edna is breaking social codes and following her own desires, or what could also be called her own will. Sexual desires are not allowed for women in her society, and Edna’s infatuation with Robert is a way for her to break one of the patriarchal rules: “For the first time she recognized anew the symptoms of infatuation which she had felt incipiently as a child, as a girl in her earliest teens, and later as a young woman” (Chopin 67). She also goes against the “programme” of social conduct that her husband has planned for her; she cancels meetings and goes against his will. She admits to Mme. Ratignolle that she has a hard time giving up herself for her children. When she eventually moves away from her home, Mme. Ratignolle questions her actions: “In some way you seem to me like a child, Edna. You seem to act without a certain amount of reflection which is necessary in this life” (Chopin 135). Edna’s way of freeing herself from her family and moving away from her home is disturbing to Mme. Ratignolle since she very much believes in the patriarchal rules and anyone who does not follow these rules must be a child, unthinking and imprudent.

The road towards emancipation is neither easy nor very successful for Edna, and the reasons for this can again be made clearer if we compare her to an emancipated woman in another of Kate Chopin’s works. Paula, in “Wiser Than A God”, is a woman who loves her music more than love itself, and she will not give up her calling for anything. She is a poor woman who is courted by a rich and well educated man, but when he asks her to give up her music and be his wife, she can and will not, even though she says she loves him: “Would you be willing to follow some other calling?” he asked, looking at her with unusual earnestness in his dark handsome eyes. ‘Oh, never!’” (Chopin, “Wiser Than A God” 45). Paula cannot even consider this request because she has already decided that music is her life’s calling, which she will not give up for any man. She tells her courter that she cannot marry “[b]ecause it doesn’t enter into the purpose of my life” (Chopin, “Wiser Than A God” 46). Paula knows what she wants and just like Eleanor she knows this before she marries, in contrast to Edna who comes to realize her mistake after marriage.

Saying “no” to marriage is not difficult in Paula’s case since she knows what she wants out of life and that marriage has no place in that plan. Edna cannot do this; she has children to think about and she has a lot of pressure from society to conform. Her feeling of responsibility makes her start to doubt if she can actually be happy as an emancipated woman.

Indeed Chopin writes that Edna is hopeful that she can work out an understanding with her husband: "There would have to be an understanding, an explanation. Conditions would some way adjust themselves, she felt; but whatever came, she had resolved never again to belong to another than herself" (Chopin 114). But it soon becomes evident that Edna doubts her own actions, as she confesses to Robert: "'I'm going to pull myself together for a while and think—try to determine what character of a woman I am; for candidly, I don't know. By all the codes which I am acquainted with, I am a devilishly wicked specimen of the sex'" (Chopin 117). This sentence shows her concern with not being able to withstand the social codes surrounding her without disliking herself too much. When Mme. Ratignolle asks her to think about her children, not to forget their needs and their reputation, Edna also realizes that her emancipation not only affects her. She may feel that she had "descended in the social scale" (Chopin 132) by moving and having an affair with Arobin, but she also feels that she has "risen in the spiritual" (Chopin 132). She is full of conflicting feelings because she is affecting people around her that she cares about. Her feelings of not wanting to belong to a man and her feelings of not wanting to hurt her children create these conflicting emotions, which eventually make her fail to become an emancipated woman.

The move to the pigeon house, the sexual affair with Arobin, and Robert's return from Mexico make Edna realize that she can no longer be the possession of any one man. She explains to Mlle. Reisz that "[t]he house, the money that provide for it, are not mine" (Chopin 113). It all belongs to her husband and therefore she feels that she must move out in order to be completely free of male dominance. She "had resolved never again to belong to another than herself" (Chopin 114). She is "no longer one of Mr. Pontellier's possessions to dispose of or not. I give myself where I choose" (Chopin 151). Edna's sexual affair with Arobin makes her feel remorseful because she has been unfaithful to her own feelings of love towards Robert. The problem is that Edna does not want to belong to Robert as his wife, so when he says that maybe her husband will let her go, she laughs and tells him that she chooses for herself now. Her choice is never to marry again, but Robert cannot handle that kind of a relationship and that is why he leaves only with a note: "Good by—because I love you" (Chopin 156). Edna now realizes that not even love can give her the relationship she desires.

To go against the social system Edna needs support and this is something that she lacks. Tyson writes that in order to resist the system "we must constantly struggle to understand and resist the various ways in which patriarchy dictates our lives although we can't always see all the ways in which it does so" (93), and this is hard to accomplish without

support. It is necessary for Edna to have someone to talk to, but not even the emancipated Mlle. Reisz offers any real support. Elisabeth Fox-Genovese sees Mlle. Reisz as a woman that stands “for the possibility of female independence. Her life may be austere and frugal, but it is her own” (260), but although she is portrayed as emancipated and Edna’s friend, she tells Edna that she is not strong enough to break free. She feels Edna’s shoulder blades and comments: ““The bird that would soar above the level plain of tradition and prejudice must have strong wings. It is a sad spectacle to see the weaklings bruised, exhausted, fluttering back to earth’” (Chopin 118). Edna also finds Mlle. Reisz’s solitude frightening and is instead portrayed as someone that actually longs for friendship, but has a hard time finding anyone that will support her new found ways: her friend Mme. Ratignolle has a hard time accepting her actions, and as explained earlier, finds her behavior childish and embarrassing. Edna’s husband, father or sisters cannot offer any support either as they are portrayed as strong believers in patriarchal society. Her doubts are expressed when she is talking to Robert about how she does not know who she is anymore. Her problem is that she has been taught something throughout life that she is now going against, following her own beliefs. The lack of support and Mme. Ratignolle’s reminder to think about her children fill Edna with conflicting emotions. She does not want to hurt the people she cares about. As she explains to the doctor, “I don’t want anything but my own way. This is wanting a good deal, of course, when you have to trample upon the lives, the hearts, the prejudice of others—but no matter—still, I shouldn’t want to trample upon the little lives” (Chopin 156). Her confusion about her female role is what ultimately leads her to really think about her situation: how she should solve her problem and deal with her conflicting feelings.

Edna’s decision to commit suicide has been criticized as a bad ending of *The Awakening*, but I would argue that it is very much in tune with the entire story. Chopin portrays Edna as a woman who struggles to find her place in society, but also as a very caring person. She does not want to hurt her children, husband or her friends, but she cannot give up her own person either. George M. Spangler is one of the critics that dislike the novel’s ending:

[I]ts great fault is inconsistent characterization, which asks the reader to accept a different and diminished Edna from the one developed so impressively before. Throughout the novel the most striking feature of Edna’s character has been her strength of will, her ruthless determination to go her own way [...] and yet quietly, almost thoughtlessly, [she] chooses death. (209)

I believe, however, that the suicide is well planned. When Edna goes to Grande Isle the narrator tells us that she has come “for no purpose but to rest” (158). She asks for dinner and a room, even inquiring about when dinner will be served and if she will be able to get fish for dinner, explaining that she is very hungry. She says this to Victor Lebrun and Mariequita and gives them no reason to think that she is not coming back. All she wants to do is to go for a quick pre-dinner swim to cool off. Consequently she is expected back to the house. When she later dies in the ocean it is well known to all who knew her that she was a very poor swimmer and the whole incident can easily be perceived as an accident. She does not leave a note or explanation for her actions so people really cannot know that she intended to kill herself. By hiding her suicide she saves her children from the disgrace of having a mother who is a social outcast. More importantly, she saves her children, her friends and husband from the disgrace of knowing someone who has committed suicide. Her husband is a man who values keeping up a good outward appearance, as can be seen by his actions when Edna moves to the pigeon house. He quickly places an ad in a paper saying that their house will be remodeled and that this is the reason for Edna’s move. Chopin writes that “Edna admired the skill of his maneuver, and avoided any occasion to balk his intention”, and allowed for Mr. Pontellier to save appearance (Chopin 132). Edna’s choice to commit suicide is simply a well planned event. She considers all her options and makes sure to leave no traces of her intentions. She thinks all night about what she is going to do, which shows a great deal of reflection on her part, contrary to what Spangler says:

Edna walked on down to the beach rather mechanically, not noticing anything special except that the sun was hot. She was not dwelling upon any particular train of thought. She had done all the thinking which was necessary after Robert went away, when she lay awake upon the sofa till morning. (Chopin 159)

She has already made up her mind as she comes to Grande Isle and simply makes sure to leave no traces behind but tries not to think about what she is about to do. That she then also goes through with her plan shows determination and a strong will. By dying she finally gives herself the freedom she so desires but cannot achieve in life, and at the same time save her family’s reputation, which makes the ending very much connected to the rest of the novel.

To conclude, Kate Chopin’s *The Awakening* portrays a woman that struggles to find her female role in the 19th century American south. Edna’s search is filled with hurdles and confusion. Her first hurdle is her upbringing which taught her that a woman’s place is

below the man and that the patriarchal rules must be followed. She has a hard time accepting that she is meant to be the possession of husband and children, and that she cannot be a person with her own ideas and desires. However, she has a big part in why she ends up in the role of the “patriarchal woman”. Her own impulsive, dreamy and somewhat childish ways obstruct her from thinking rationally and realistically when she is about to choose a husband. Her marriage to Mr. Pontellier is based on dreams and hopes instead of actual facts; she never actually tries to find out his true character and what he wants out of married life. Edna therefore finds herself in a female role which she resents, being everything she tried to avoid. Having no other choice than to push reality aside she becomes very unhappy. When she can no longer ignore her unhappiness she starts to awaken. The portrayal of this young woman’s search for a new female identity is filled with realizations. The “modern woman” role she desires she cannot achieve and the “emancipated woman’s” role she does not feel comfortable with.

The confusion that Chopin shows in Edna’s character explains why Edna in the end takes her own life. Our protagonist is a woman who searches for an identity that she cannot find due to choices she has already made and a society which she cannot change. A new identity at this point in her life is basically impossible for her. She cares about her children, husband and her friends, and her new-found need for freedom creates conflicting emotions within her. These conflicting emotions together with her own understanding that there is no way to release herself from the bonds of patriarchy make her realize that she cannot be happy being either the “patriarchal” woman or the “emancipated” woman. Her discovery of sexual desires, resisting her husband’s rules, and the parting from home and family tell her that she can break with social rules but that it will not make her happy. Her friends and family do not support her emancipation, and her own feelings of guilt for abandoning her children weigh very heavy on her shoulders. In the end Edna considers her choices and finds that her committing suicide is the best thing for everyone involved. It is not a romantic, heroic or pathetic end, but a portrayal of a woman’s need to find peace of mind. The protagonist grows out of her childishness and comes to show a great deal of consideration and determination towards the end of the novel. She finds clarity and solves the problem at hand in the best possible way she can think of. Edna finds her desired freedom and she hurts her loved ones as little as possible. By comparing her to other female characterizations in two of Chopin’s short stories I have shown that Edna is a very complex woman that has made previous choices in life that leads her to a rational but also very final ending, very much in tune with Chopin’s portrayal of her throughout *The Awakening*.

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