

## Edna's Self-Pursuit of Absurdity in *The Awakening*

Xiaoxu Sun

Tianjin Foreign Studies University, Tianjin 300202

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**Abstract:** *The Awakening* is a short but first class novel of the late nineteenth century written by Kate Chopin. It is about Edna's gradual awakening and her subsequent seeking of artistic development and sexual fulfillment outside marriage. Based on the theories of existentialism, this paper tries to analyze Edna's self-pursuit and her subsequent life journey from the absurdity of Edna's Marriage, Edna's alienation to her freedom of choice.

**Keywords:** *The Awakening*; Marriage; Alienation; Freedom

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Since its publication, *The Awakening* has been the focus of controversy and criticism for its depiction of the extramarital affairs of Edna, and Chopin's attitude towards her as one of sympathy and appreciation rather than criticism and punishment. However, with the rising of the feminist movement in 1950s and 1960s, people begin to evaluate *The Awakening*.

Absurdity is a major concept of existentialism. Existentialists maintain that the world is meaningless, and man's existence is absurd. In *Being and Time*, Heidegger states that man is confronted with nothingness and loneliness and in constant anguish because there is disconnectedness between man and his circumstance, which makes him feel being thrown into a fragmented world (145). In such an incomprehensible world, man is lonely, helpless, and anxious. This is the plight of human being's true existence. Therefore, life is absurd in a large sense. In *The Awakening*, Edna's life, especially her marriage is full of absurdity.

As we all know, love is an important element in a marriage and it should be the first thing we consider when we are planning to form a family. However, things are different when it comes to Edna. Growing up in a family where her mother dies when she is still a little girl, Edna hardly gets any love from her mother. Rising up by her rigid father, Edna only has a vague notion of love which fails to lead her to love others. When she is in her youth, she keeps secretly being obsessed with some random figures around her and her families and she thinks it is love. When Edna meets her future husband, she is in the midst of her fanatical obsession with a famous tragedian. According to Kate Chopin, Edna's marriage to Léonce Pontellier is purely an accident based on her wrong concept of love. On one hand, she fancies that there is a sympathy of thought and taste between her and Léonce. On the other hand, she marries him just out of her rebellious spirit to the violent opposition of her father and her sister who are against her marriage with a Catholic. We may wonder how a marriage like this functions well. This is also why it is not surprising when the readers find out Edna's affairs with other men.

The absurdity between Edna and Léonce lies in Edna's purpose of getting married. Without a correct concept of love and marriage, Edna marries Léonce out of her wrong judgement and her rebellious spirit. After they get married, Léonce treats Edna as a valuable piece of personal property and he cares nothing about Edna's inner feelings which is totally different from Edna's imagination. In the end, the whole marriage is meaningless to Edna. Edna's marriage and her life after the marriage are full of absurdities.

Alienation is one of the basic ideas of Sartre's existentialism. There is an inherent danger of alienation in the relationship between the individual and others. When an individual fails in his struggle against the environment, he will realize his frustration and hide his true self and return to the potential self-state. In this process, the individual's real self is gradually separated from his consciousness. The integrity and independence of the individual are lost, and the individual ends in loneliness (235).

*The Awakening* is originally named *A Solitary Soul* according to Chopin's notes. It indicates clearly Edna's loneliness in the process of her pursuit of freedom and liberation. The whole novel is filled with Edna's solitude from the beginning to the end. Influenced by her own family, Edna grows up as a girl who seldom shows her true feelings or talks about her true self outwardly. Even when she thinks that she falls in love with someone, she keeps her feelings within herself. According to Chopin, "Edna often wondered at one propensity which sometimes had inwardly disturbed her without causing any outward show or manifestation on her part" (36). After her marriage, she keeps her true self and feelings in her own little world and separates herself with the outer world. She suffers from loneliness and which ends in alienation. Seyerstedt argues that tradition and social conventions force women to believe that they are a woman first and a social person second. But as soon as a woman realizes that being an independent person is more important than being a woman, she, like Edna, is trapped in her self-consciousness. She suffers in freedom and tries very hard to justify her existence. Eventually, freedom becomes a negative state and she ends in a lonely soul (49).

Edna is a woman with free will in a male-dominated society. When she gradually awakens, she begins to pursue her selfhood. She quits entertaining her guest and tries to be an artist. No one in *The Awakening* can understand her self-pursuit. Edna's husband

thinks she is kind of weird and growing a little unbalanced mentally. Arabin knows her emotions yet does not understand her. Edna thinks that Robert is her last straw. However, Robert treats her as a property of Mr. Pontellier. Edna's way of pursuing self hood gains no support and understanding from others. Eventually, her struggling to achieve freedom and independence ends in vain and she falls into the spiritual crisis that generates her loneliness and alienation.

In *The Awakening*, Edna experiences her spiritual freedom and her self-existence for the first time on an island while leaving her home and family. She feels that she is like a sailboat and that the chains that bind her are broken so that she can drift freely (53). The experience on the island foreshadows Edna's desire for more space to discover her self-existence and her freedom. Later, Edna begins to make her choices freely.

The first act of Edna's self-pursuit is to move out of the big house where she and her family live. Moving into the pigeon house represents a crucial step towards Edna's self-pursuit and her freedom-seeking. When she decides to move out of her house, she just informs her husband instead of trying to reach a mutual agreement with him. Without much thought, Edna just follows her heart to make every choice and she barely gives any concern of her responsibility as a wife and a mother. Existentialism emphasizes that freedom should go hand in hand with responsibility. Sartre declares that "I say that man is condemned to be free. Condemned, because he did not create himself, yet is nevertheless at liberty, and from the moment that he is thrown into this world he is responsible for everything he does" (295). Owning a place of her own gives Edna a new and strange sense of freedom. However, the sudden freedom is a double-edged sword. It brings not only joy and relief to Edna, but also loneliness and alienation. After depriving herself of responsibility as a wife and a mother, Edna suffers from the loneliness and alienation of being alone in her own space (Long 5).

In order to get rid of her constraint of her social role and get complete freedom, Edna's second act of her free choice is to commit suicide. Edna naively believes that she has the right to choose her lover and she is free from the obligations of marriage and no one else has the right to criticize her life choices or make moral judgments about her. However, she is wrong. Once a man makes a free choice, he must be responsible for all that he chooses. However, Edna cannot accept that no one can understand her free act especially her lover Robert and she falls into confusion of her spiritual world when she get Robert's note. Edna finally realizes that she can never get rid of her role and responsibility as a wife and a mother. For Edna, there is no hope in her life. In order not to become a slave of life, death becomes her final outlet and liberation. When she drowns herself in the ocean, she thinks of Léonce and her children. "They were a part of her life. But they need not thought that they could possess her, body and soul" (Chopin 137). Edna commits suicide for her freedom and her self-pursuit.

In conclusion, Edna and Léonce's marriage is full of absurdities. After they get married, Edna gradually pursues her self-existence and her freedom. In the process of her self-pursuit, she suffers from loneliness and alienation. However, Edna never gives up. In the end, she drowns herself in the ocean to get final freedom of her body and her soul.

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## Author Introduction:

Xiaoxu Sun(1996-), Female, born in May 1996, Zhangjiakou City, Hebei Province, postgraduate student of Tianjin Foreign Studies University, British and American Literature