Edna's Self Predicament in The Awakening

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Abstract: The Awakening reveals women's struggle and predicament in the pursuit of self. With the help of William James' Self theory, this paper will analyze the representation and relationship of the protagonist Edna's self predicament from her material self, social self and spiritual self, and then explore the reasons of her death and the importance of balancing different selves.
Keywords: The Awakening; Kate Chopin; Self predicament

1. Introduction

The Awakening (1899), as Kate Chopin's most representative work, is regarded as a feminist novel, because it has revealed women's struggle to pursue sexual and spiritual emancipation. This novel tells a story about a young married woman Edna who gradually liberated her mind and chased her inner desire in spite of outside opposition, but finally was pushed into a dead end and walked desperately into the sea. Along with the awakening of Edna from physical to mental, it reveals the oppression of patriarchy and the repressive inner world of women imprisoned in marriage in the nineteenth century.

As a preeminent American philosopher and psychologist, William James (1842-1910) has divided a person's mental picture into the "I" and "Me". He regards the "I" as the "pure Ego" and the "Me" as "empirical me". The empirical Self, in his The Principles of Psychology (1890), could be divided into three parts: material self, social self and spiritual self. Material self means the things that a person owns, body, clothes, family, property and so on. Social self is constituted by the roles that a person plays in the society. It refers to "the recognition which he gets from his mates" (James 184). Spiritual self is "a man's inner or subjective being, his physical faculties or dispositions" (185). It is a person's most enduring and intimate part, an original force. It connects physical self and social self. The material self is the base; the spiritual self is at the top; and the social self is in the middle. Competition and conflicts occur among different selves, and the balance of them is of great significance.

2. Edna's Separation of Physical Self

Firstly, Edna's material self, to a large extent, is constructed by the traditional patriarchal society. Though the Creoles seem more lively and tolerant, "two sexes clearly have their separate spheres" (Jones 181). "A distinctly nineteenth-century framework…divided society into two separate spheres: a private, female world, centered on domesticity and affective family ties, and a public, male world of production and politics."(Barney 223) Edna existed to meet the needs of her family. Edna' body, after her marriage, belonged to her husband, Léonce Pontellier. She was dependent on Léonce for survival and was regarded as "a vulnerable piece of personal property" of her husband (Chopin 21). She should take care of her husband and children according to social norms. Besides, her dress code should fit her social status.

However, along with her awakening from body to mind, Edna constantly rejected material self to prove her own identity as an individual. As James states, "our immediate family is a part of ourselves" (183). In order to fulfill her individuality, Edna chose to distant herself from her family members. She defied her husband and left her sons to their grandparents and refused to attend her weekly reception. Besides, she moved from her husband's big house to "pigeon house". All of these show her determination to get rid of the shackles of her relationship with family members. Then, her clothing was also a sign of her changes. According to James, clothes are of great significance to one's material self, as it signifies one's status and identity. For instance, after she came home in New Orleans, Edna refused to wear "her usual Tuesday reception gown" but was "in ordinary house dress" (70). Before walking into the sea, she "cast the unpleasant, pricking garments from her" and "stood naked in the open air" (136). Her clothing reveals her wish to separate herself from those material things that could impede her pursuit of individual freedom. Besides, in order to cut her dependence on her husband, she began making money by selling her paintings. She got rid of many servants in that house and only one for her convenience. During her withdrawing from material self, she felt less restraint from the outside. Meantime, Edna's rejection to her material self not only lets her gain some freedom, but also makes her away from the social life, resulting in her disconnection from society.

3. Edna's Negative Resistance of Social Self

Secondly, on the way of Edna's awakening, her social self was greatly decreased, as what she had done jeopardized the moral code and was not recognized by society. When the novel began at Grand Isle, Edna was a young mother who had a successful hus-

band in business and two sons. Her image quite jibes with traditional perceptions of being a well-behaved woman. Gradually, she was familiar with other people at this island, such as Adéle, Reisz and Robert. These three people play crucial roles in her shaping of social self, especially the last one. The beauty and greatness of Adele as a housewife provided an example for Edna, through which she saw the suffering and sacrifice of being a perfect wife and mother. Besides, she encouraged Edna to express her feeling and emotions, which catalyzed her awakening. From artistic Reisz, she perceived women' independent consciousness and received understanding from the outside, but this kind of understanding was weak for her infirm mind. Edna received caring and accompany from Robert and her sexual consciousness was gradually awakening but her love for Robert was not fulfilled due to Robert's departure. As James claims, "the most peculiar social self which one is apt to have is in the mind of the person one is in love with" and this self affects "the most intense elation and dejection"(184). Robert's departure laid the foundation for her subsequent despair. She was overwhelmed by her unsatisfied love and then resorted to notorious Alcée Arobin to appease her sexual desire. Then, her affair was beyond the bottom line of social morality, so her practice was not recognized by others. "A man has as many social selves as there are individuals who recognize him". (184) Edna was criticized by her failing to assume the responsibility of being a virtuous wife and devoted mother and had marital infidelity. She had to bear the rumors outside and was regarded as a "bad woman", her social self greatly decreased. At last, her social roles, as a daughter, wife, and mother are reduced to a misfit in society.

4. Edna's Tough Pursuit of Spiritual Self

Thirdly, Edna's great spiritual self constantly suppresses her material self and social self, making her astray from others. "Psychic dispositions are the most enduring and intimate part of the self". (185) It showed when Edna was a child, she already lived "her own small life all within herself" and she had lived her dual life—"that outward existence which conforms, the inward life that questions" (32). The rebellious spirit and sensitive character were already rooted in her heart. After her awakening, her inward feeling was greatly magnified and kind of out of control. When Edna stayed with Robert, she realized her role is not just "Mrs. Pontellier" but "her position in the universe as a human being, and to recognize her relations as an individual to the world within and about her" (31). This spiritual self is her subjective and most intimate self, which she desperately pursued later in her life. Her romantic feeling to Robert was a blasting fuse to liberate her spiritual self. Later, even though Mrs. Ratignolle admonished her that living in "pigeon house" and staying with Alcée could be detrimental to her reputation, Edna was still stuck with her own decisions and regarded her feelings and desire as the most important thing. Meanwhile, her friend Reisz, an odd and disagreeable woman, encouraged Edna to devote herself to painting. However, she failed to become an artist like Reisz, as she could not bear to be a weird woman alone.

Edna, regardless of outside objections and moral boundaries, is dominated by her ideal pursuit, which renders her stuck in desperate spiritual self. But the reality is she did not have the strong wings to live a life alone. She felt constantly hesitant and was easily affected by others. Robert left her and even when he came back, he still disappointed her and could not understand her feeling and needs. She was pushed into a desperate situation, as she had abandoned so much for chasing her ideal love and freedom. On the way of awakening, she did not find the balance among her triple selves. For Edna, the "pigeon house" is a place where she pursued her freedom, but also a prison that confines her mind. Edna's awakening not only enables her to acquire a spiritual growth, but also makes her unable to confront the reality. In this sense, Edna could "exist only in a female role of limitation" (Gray 72). Death seems to be the only way for her to avoid that confining society and repressive environment.

5. Conclusion

Through Edna's separation of physical self, negative resistance of social self and tough pursuit of spiritual self, it could be seen her predicament between her triple selves and the outside world. The bondage of traditional ideas on women and the limitations of her mental unbalance are the main reasons of her final death. Although it is inspiring that Edna chooses the destruction of physical self, thus reaches the transcendence of spiritual self, it still reveals the importance of balancing different selves and conduct rational struggle in society.

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