

Symbolism of Activities in Awakening

Sophie Zhao

*School of Foreign Languages, University of Science and Technology, Liaoning
China*

ABSTRACT. Symbols play an important part in literature as literary works are the results of combination of both reality and imagination. *The Awakening* is a novel full of symbols. Understanding the meaning of these symbols is vital to a full appreciation of the story. This paper will illustrate symbolism in *The Awakening* from the aspect of activities.

KEYWORDS: Symbolism, Activities, Awakening

1. Introduction

The Awakening is a novel full of symbols. Within all the narrative segments there are often central and powerful symbols that serve to add meaning to the novel and to underline some subtle point Chopin is making. And all these symbols work as effective means for the author to portray a solitary woman's image. Understanding the meaning of these symbols is vital to a full appreciation of the story. This paper will illustrate symbolism in *The Awakening* from the aspect of activities.

The symbols of activity in this novel inspire women to find their own ways to express themselves. All the traditional rules can be doubted or rejected if they prescribe inequality to the female. When a woman has ways to express herself adequately, she has a better chance to stand equal to men and be herself. Once freedom and equality allow the growth of selfhood, her self-expression becomes more original and authentic.

2. Playing The Piano

Enjoying music is a symbol of freedom and another important means to animate Edna's solitary life. In *The Awakening*, there are a lot of descriptions of playing the piano. Both Adele and Mlle. Reisz play the piano. Each woman functions to stress a different aspect of the narrative. Adele is considered a musician by Leonce, but she does not play for art, instead she does so to keep her husband and children cheerful and to set time for parties. Mlle. Reisz, on the other hand, is disliked by all, but is granted status as a musician by only Robert and Edna. The issue of the piano playing echoes the issue of placement in society. If you follow the rules and norms whatever you accomplish is considered great, if you defy those rules you are shunned and disparaged. Thus, the piano playing becomes a symbol of societal rules and regulations.

Throughout *The Awakening*, the manner in which each of the characters uses music gives us a sense of Edna's ideological alignment in relation to the novel's other characters. Additionally, Edna's exploration of music and her meditations upon its significance enable her own (visual) art to flourish. Edna first learns about the emotive power of music from Mademoiselle Reisz. Whereas Adele Ratignolle's piano playing had merely conjured sentimental pictures for Edna, the older woman's playing stirs new feelings and probes unexplored emotional territories in her. Mademoiselle Reisz uses music as a form of artistic expression, not merely as a way of entertaining others. In contrast to Mademoiselle Reisz, the Farival twins play the piano purely for the sake of the gathered company. The twins' association with the Virgin Mary, and, hence, with a destiny of chaste motherliness, links them thematically with notions of how Victorian women should behave. Their piano playing-entertaining but not provocative, pleasant but not challenging-similarly serves as the model for how women should use art. It becomes clear that, for a Victorian woman, the use of art as a form of self-exploration and self-articulation constitutes a rebellion. Correspondingly, Mademoiselle Reisz's use of music situates her as a nonconformist and a sympathetic confidante for Edna's awakening.

The difference Edna detects between the piano playing of Mademoiselle Reisz and that of Adele Ratignolle seems also to testify to Edna's emotional growth. She reaches a point in her awakening in which she is able to hear what a piece of music says to her, rather than idly inventing random pictures to accompany the sounds.

Thus, music, or Edna's changing reactions to it, also serves to help the reader locate Edna in her development.

In her music enjoyment, Edna is still obsessed with the solitary mood. In chapter IX, Edna entitles the piece of music "solitude", which is often played by Madam Ratignolle and whose original name is beyond her knowledge. When she hears the playing of this piece, in her imagination, there will be "the figure of a man, standing beside a desolate rock on the seashore. He was naked. His attitude was one of hopeless resignation as he looked toward a distant bird winging its flight away from him". (Walker, 1993, 44) The nomination and the solitary images are the reflection of Edna's personal solitude.

3. Learning to Paint

Drawing pictures for Edna, is a literary activity and one of the ways to brighten Edna's dim solitary life. It is through the process of drawing pictures that Edna reaches a certain point of her awakening. Edna sees drawing pictures as a way of self-expression and of self-assertion. She learns a lot as a human being when she concentrates her attention on her drawing.

Once Edna is aware of music's power to express emotion, she begins to paint as she has never painted before. She sets a high artistic standard for herself and does not treat her skill as a pleasant hobby meant to enrich family life. Edna's behavior when she retreats to her atelier to paint so enrages Leonce that he compares his wife's disregard for her responsibilities as a wife and mother with the ideal behavior of Adele, openly criticizing Edna for not being more like her friend, "There's Madame Ratignolle; because she keeps up her music, she doesn't let everything else go to chaos. And she's more of a musician than you are a painter." (Walker, 1993, 77) Edna is not at all influenced or intimidated by this criticism. Painting ceases to be a diversion and becomes instead a form of true expression. In this way, her solitary time of duration may be shortened.

4. Learning to Swim

Chopin uses the scene of learning to swim as a symbol of empowerment. Edna

has struggled all summer to learn to swim. She has been coached by almost all the people on Grand Isle. At last she can swim freely. Swimming provides Edna with courage, strength and joy. On the night when she can swim, she senses her strong passion for Robert and she understands clearly the ugliness of her marriage without love. Still on this night, far out in the sea, she learns a painful lesson of solitude and death.

Another symbolic meaning of Edna's learning to swim is that the capability of swimming may be regarded as the necessary step of her personal success. Even if she swims to the eternity in the end of the story, she still may be regarded as the winner in certain sense.

But her success is loosely connected with her solitary sense. In chapter X, the people attending the party of the Saturday evening go swimming in compliance with the proposal by Robert. Edna is very excited because she has mastered the simple skill of swimming after a lot of pains. "A feeling of exultation overtook her, as if some power of significance import had given her soul, she grew daring and reckless, overestimating her strength, she wanted to swim far out, where no woman had swum before." (Walker, 1993, 46) Gradually, she swims out alone. "She turned her face seaward to gather in an impression of space and solitude, which the vast expanse of water, meeting and melting with moonlit sky, conveyed to her excited fancy." (Walker, 1993, 47) But the stretch of water behind her works as a barrier between her and other swimmers. The fear of her unaided strength to swim back to her people smites her soul. A quick vision of death appalls her and almost enfeebles her senses. Thus, "a thousand emotions" have swept her this night. We can imagine how solitary she is at that moment!

5. Eating and Sleeping

Eating and sleeping are also important symbols in *The Awakening*. As we know, the part of the novel which deals with Edna's sojourn at Grand Isle is paced by the rhythm of human being's basic needs' especially the most primitive ones of eating and sleeping.

"Edna's central problem, once the hidden 'self' begins to exert its inexorable power, is that her libidinal appetite has been fixed at the oral level. Edna herself has

an insistent occupation with nourishment; on the simplest level, she is concerned with food. Her favorite adjective is 'delicious': she sees many mother-women as 'delicious' in their role; she carries echoes of her children's voices 'like the memory of a delicious song'; when she imagines Robert, she thinks 'how delicious it would be to have him there with her'. And the notion of something's being good because it might be good to 'eat' (or internalized in some way) is echoed in all of her relationships with other people"(Cully,1976,208)

There are several symbolic meals in the story and each has its own mythic aspect. The meal on Cheniere Caminada occurs after she awakens from a fairy tale sleep; the dinner party in Chapter XXX is viewed as a re-creation of the Last Supper. And it also implies the climax of the story. But more than usual, She is left alone to have her meals although she is a married woman. Even in the lively dinner party, Edna still feels the solitary mood very much.

Sleeping is also among the symbolic motives running through the novel. Edna's moments of awakening are often preceded by sleep and she does a great deal of it. Some critics call it the sleepest novel in the American literary canon and see Edna's sleep pattern as a rebellion against natural rhythms. Sleep is also a means of escaping and repairing her tattered emotions. The underlying reason of Edna's sleep and rebellion is the solitary living atmosphere causing her a lot of suffering and she wants to turn a blind eye to the external world to put her contradictory thoughts in order. On the other hand her sleep may be another method to shorten her time of feeling solitude.

6. Committing Suicide

This last scene of suicide is written in a beautiful, subtle prose. Chopin's writing is balanced and calm, and it aptly captures Edna's mental state. For the first time in the novel, Edna has thought extensively about her course of action, and she knows exactly what she's going to do. To the end, Edna remains true to herself. In deciding to kill herself, she is refusing to sacrifice her illusions for anyone or anything, including her children. She sees death as her only path of escape, and to some extent, she may be right. In a world where she is limited to being a wife and a mother, she is trapped in an unfulfilling marriage and has children who she only

sometimes enjoys. She has already been defined by her society, and she cannot redefine herself without jeopardizing the futures of her children.

In returning to Grand Isle, the novel comes full circle. The island was the scene of her original awakening, and after a year, she is once again returning to the ocean. The water, which had seduced her with its sound and helped awaken her sensuous nature, reclaims her in this chapter. She first realized her mental, physical, and emotional potential while discovering how to swim, so it is only natural that she destroys this potential by drowning herself.

However, the novel does not end in a pessimistic tone. Before she dives into the ocean, Edna stands naked in the sun and feels once again reborn. Edna destroys herself, but paradoxically, she is also reclaiming her life. She is asserting that her life is hers to have and to destroy, and she is refusing to sacrifice it on behalf of society.

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