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Awaken To Pain & Suffering

In Kate Chopin's 'The Awakening', we can see the development of Edna Pontellier, a young mother and wife living in Louisiana in the 1890s. On her quest for independence she crushes against the borders and limitations of her responsibilities and cultural expectations. I will now examine Edna Pontellier's struggle and analyze the effectiveness of her actions.

At the beginning of the novel, Edna is living a peaceful and happy life. She is married to a prosperous broker and caring husband, has two healthy children, and established a well-respected position in her society. Yet, her struggle for independence begins when she feels herself being attracted to Robert Lebrun.

She realizes that Robert represents in many ways her childhood idea of love. He has similarities to her first love and also takes great interest in her artistic and emotional life. With her growing liking of Robert, she also realizes the many ills in her current life. We learn that "[Edna] was not a mother-woman" (16) and that "her marriage to Leonce Pontellier was purely an accident" (32). Both indicate her unhappiness in her role as mother and wife, two responsibilities that she never really wanted. "[Her children's] absence was sort of relief ... it seemed to free her of a responsibility she had blindly assumed" (33). Instead she realizes how restraining and unaiding her society is.

While she realizes her growing dissatisfaction, she also feels like an outcast. All her friends take great pride and joy in raising children and leading families. None of them seem to have explored the path Edna is about to take. “She had apprehended instinctively the dual life – that outward existence which confirms, the inward life which questions” (27). The more her emotional, sexual, and artistic needs grow, the more she feels like an outcast and unable to find help. She tells one of her friends: “Sometimes I feel ... as if I were walking through the green meadow again, idly, aimlessly, unthinking and unguided” (30).

She finally breaks away from her duties of mother and wife and tries to define her own role and life. During this process, Edna realizes that her love for Robert was misplaced and that he does not seem to be the loving, caring friend she wants him to be. “There was no human being whom she wanted near her except Robert; and she realized that the day would come when he, too, and the thought of him would melt out of her existence.” Saddened, “there was no one thing in the world which she desired” (188). After having her last and final dream shattered, she feels completely lost in her crumbling world. As an ultimate statement to her friends and society, she commits suicide.

Unfortunately she does not leave a note or an explanation for her friends and family, and I have serious doubt whether her death will have the impact Edna desired. Her suicide was staged as a drowning accident, and I am afraid everybody will take it as such. Before her accident, she even made plans with friends to have dinner together that night, so her suicide intent is even less obvious. In fact, I am very displeased with her final action. I think suicide can be a legitimate alternative to the pain of our life, but it should be chosen by cowards only; only those who are too afraid to live have reason to

die. Edna on the other hand has never been afraid of life. Motivated by purely selfish reasons, an endless struggle and a broken heart, she simply doesn't feel like living anymore. It is sad to see a woman like Edna - full of unique experience, intelligence, and a strong inborn sense for personal freedom – waste her life so ineffectively. Instead, she could have easily committed her life to redefine the roles of her society and to pursue her personal freedom. In doing so, she could have ensured that her children wouldn't grow up as restricted as she did.

Charles Bukowski wrote in his poem “Hug the Dark”: “permanent living peace is permanent living death.” (113). I agree that after a long hard struggle, we are always able to appreciate peace a lot more. It seems as if pain and unhappiness are often precursors to our personal and cultural development. Yet, while pain and suffering seem to be part of human life, we should never lose track of that precious next joyful moment that lies ahead.

Works Cited

Bukowski, Charles. *Play the Piano Drunk Like a Percussion Instrument Until the Fingers Begin to Bleed a Bit*. Santa Rosa: Black Sparrow Press, 1997.

Chopin, Kate. *The Awakening*. New York.: Avon, 1972.