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**Edna's Home and Homelessness:
A Feminist and an Archetypal Interpretation of Kate Chopin's *The Awakening***

In my first reading and re-reading of Kate Chopin's novel *The Awakening*, I focused on multiple themes and narrative's aspects. The novel both confused me and left my expectations unfulfilled. I expected Edna to go farther and not give in to the desperation. I was upset with Chopin creating such a strong woman, but not taking it far enough. I wrote that "even after her "awakening" and after her leaving her miserable marriage, Edna again attaches herself to a man; she has a desire and even a need to be married and belong to someone else." After much exploration of the context of the novel, however, and after looking at the contextual documents that Walker provided in her edition, I realized that Chopin is a revolutionary author that gave a huge precedent for the development of the feminist movement. The advertisements for the women are objectifying and focus solely on appearances—no spiritual or intellectual growth (142-145). I also paid great attention to the imagery Chopin used in the novel—the sea, the sun, the houses, the gardens. I kept wondering if any of those objects were consciously added by the author, or they were simply decorations to the narrative.

After looking back at my reading response and my initial and secondary reactions to *The Awakening*, I was wondering why I am so sympathetic with Edna. On one hand, I think she is selfish for abandoning her children, but, on the other hand, I am proud of her for being the only one who resists the society's oppression and who, even though through death, breaks the pattern of objectification of women. From the first pages of the novel, Edna is a lost traveler—she seems to belong to a circle of high class Louisiana Creoles, but she doesn't

fit in. She is a Midwestern American woman, but she has no way of returning to her previous life. She used to be religious when she was raised as a protestant, but she is no longer spiritually involved in any religion. She is among women, but she is unlike any of them. She is a member of a family, but she is restricted to wifely and motherly duties. In short, she exists in a world where no place is hers and no one understands her.

After many re-readings of the novel, I started to realize that Edna tries to create different homes for herself both physically and spiritually. She tries to belong to people and she tries to belong to places, but in general she is simply homeless—she cannot go back to her parents and she cannot have a complete home of her own. She is caught alone in the middle of unfamiliar culture. I am particularly interested in these themes because of my own journey from home to an alien culture and my struggle to adapt to the new society while trying not to lose my origin and personality. It is interesting that Edna, an American, feels foreign in her won country, and Creole women, who are recent immigrants, feel at home in Louisiana.

I chose to interpret the novel through two different prisms—the feminist criticism and the archetypal criticism. Feminist criticism is an appropriate approach to the themes of home and homelessness for one because Chopin constantly reiterates the importance of one's home—both in terms of living in a space and feeling at home. Secondly, the role of women in a house was a specific and a determined one at the end of the nineteenth century. Feminist movement is not strong yet, but Chopin makes a leap and created this rebellious woman who is not afraid to EVEN own a home. The feeling of alienation and frustration has become part of women's lives because they are taken out of their native environment and placed into an unnatural state of an appendix to another human being. Being confined to a house and house responsibilities is what lead Edna to rebel and rather die than have that type of home.

Another approach that seems very appropriate is archetypal approach. Chopin uses a countless number of archetypes and myths that label Creole culture a primitive society. She also provides multiple archetypes to accompany Edna's feelings of being at home and being lost—sea, garden, etc. I am fascinated by the idea of taking into account something that has come from generations of predecessors—something that belongs to a culture and not a single man. The presence of dreams in the novel and their importance invite to analyze the myths and archetypes offered by the author. In the cinematic interpretation of the novel, the creators seem to reinforce the archetypes even further with their uses of colors and images representative of the archetypes.

Feminist Reading

In *The Awakening*, the terms of being “self” and being at home are synonymous. When Edna starts to realize her “position in the universe as a human being,” she is realizing both that she is not at peace and not at home. She is “the other” (Donovan qtd. in Wallace) in her husband's eyes and the eyes of his community. She is looking for space and room to breathe. “When Edna was at last alone, she breathed a big genuine sigh of relief,... perambulated around the outside of the house, investigating...” Edna discovers herself as a new woman at the same time she is looking at her current residence.

Though the phrase does not appear until Chapter four in the novel, the movie *Grand Isle* starts with “Mrs. Pontellier, though she had married a Creole, was not thoroughly at home in the society of Creoles.” First thing that we can notice about this statement, which the makers of the movie found so crucial for the plot, is that marriage and feeling at home in Edna's life don't go hand in hand. She enters the culture of her husband without “feeling at home.”

It is interesting to me that Kate Chopin didn't participate in the discussion about women's rights and kept her opinions to herself, but she wrote such a scandalous novel. I think Chopin was at home, she knew who she was when she was creating her novel, her art. At the time, her husband was deceased and she had her own space and air to create what she wanted. In her feminist analysis of the novel, Elizabeth Fox-Genovese writes that "neither *The Awakening* nor any of her [Chopin's] other writings suggest that she secretly espoused woman suffrage or related causes. To the contrary, everything that she wrote, including *The Awakening*, indicates that she viewed women's independence as a personal more than a social matter." (58) This reinforces the idea that the surroundings and the personal space and internal independence were more important to Chopin than the grand scheme of the feminist movement. Chopin tries to bring everything back to a local view—closer to home.

And here it is, without any intention to strike fear into men's minds, Chopin writes the most preposterous feminist novel. Yes, Chopin does leave plenty of room to contemplate the meaning of the novel—should Edna be simply diagnosed with hysteria since she commits suicide, or does she set an example of a woman who is not satisfied with being an object? I don't believe that Chopin didn't know how scandalous her novel would be, she definitely gives an example of how to move from being "others" to being "selves."

Even though Edna is a strong and rebellious woman, she is crucially dependent on the men in the story. At first, Edna is dependent on Mr. Pontellier. "her marriage to Léonce Pontellier was purely and accident...He pleased her...Add to this the violent opposition of her father and her sister Margaret to her marriage with a Catholic, and we need seek no further for the motives which led her to accept Monsieur Pontellier for her husband." (15) Edna's decision to marry Léonce is obviously a voluntary one—she is a mischievous child

who wants to disobey her parents—it is in no way a statement and not a search for a new home, a new life.” She sets herself up to leave her home and to lead a life she doesn’t know.

Furthermore, in her wedding vows, Edna, as a woman in the nineteenth century, would have to vow to “obey” her husband. So, Edna, while trying to be capricious, becomes trapped in the circle where she can’t be a person because she promised to be a wife. Edna was in such a hurry to leave home, but what she didn’t realize is that she was losing herself in this move. Through all her struggles, Edna tries to acquire her own space—a room or a house. It is peculiar that at the Grand Isle house, Edna has her own room, but in the New Orleans house, it is a joined bedroom with her husband. She is happier at Grand Isle when she has her own space, and she is constantly crying or fighting with Léonce when she is sharing the space to him. Léonce is also trying to control where she is and at some point is trying to force her into a space—“I can’t permit you to stay out there all night. You must come in the house instantly.” She responds to him in the most unexpected way for a wife and a woman in the Creole society. “Léonce, go to bed,” she said. “I mean to stay out here, I don’t wish to go in, and I don’t intend to. Don’t speak to me like that again; I shall not answer you.” Edna wishes to be outside the house, where she feels freer than inside. She is an object to Léonce and he imposes stereotypes on her—a woman must obey her husband and do what he says. Josephine Donovan says that literature “depends upon a series of fixed images of women, stereotypes” (Donovan qtd. in Wallace), but Chopin manages to break out of this tradition and creates a woman that does not comply with her husband’s requests for her to be confined to a room she doesn’t want to occupy.

Also, men intrude in Edna's space. Alcee, for instance, comes into her house and wouldn't leave. To me the scene of him refusing to leave after he says "good night" is almost violent, as though he is not just trying to convince her to sleep with him, but to consume her as a woman and a person. Aside from being a suspicious character, he is an intruder, a conqueror of her home.

The specific possessive pronouns tell us a whole lot about Chopin's intention for each house or space in the novel. Edna has "her" room at the Grand Isle house, the New Orleans house is "the" house until the children and Léonce leave and Edna is left to herself (then it becomes "my" [Edna's] house, but not home). Chopin doesn't call it "their" house. She says "The Pontelliers possessed a very charming home on Esplanade Street in New Orleans." "The Pontelliers" here sounds more like Léonce's predecessors, as though he inherited it from his family. Rather than saying Edna and Léonce (which wouldn't be appropriate to say anyway because women were not meant own property, but be property), Chopin ironically calls the house the possession of the Pontelliers, which most likely implies Léonce and the boys. Then, right away, Chopin calls it "his" house. "Mr. Pontellier was very fond of walking about his house examining his various possessions." Léonce has no consideration that it is Edna's house as well because she is one of the possessions inside the house.

Possessive pronouns are very important in the discussion of the New Orleans house. Chopin talks in term such as "Edna quitted the house," "went back into the house," "dressed and left the house," as opposed to Mr. Pontellier leaving "home." The city house has nothing to do with Edna. She can't be herself there—she is an oppressed woman who is to keep her appointments and entertain people with whom she has nothing in common. She doesn't own the house, and to her the house is the sign of oppression she is enduring.

However, Edna's interaction with the city house changes when she is left alone in it. It is reminiscent with Mr. Pontellier's assessment of possessions. "She walked all through the house, from one room to another, as if inspecting it for the first time" When Edna looks about the house and assesses it; she is taking charge and behaves as a man would.

Also, only when she decides to leave Léonce, does she say "I am going to move away from my house on Esplanade Street." She calls it "my", but she doesn't call it home. I think there is an important distinction between "house" and "home", and for Edna especially. She only mentions "home" when she talks about Kentucky, when she remembers belonging to herself. As a little girl being at home, she was more independent than now, a grown woman in her husband's house.

Furthermore, Chopin is not the only female author who is addressing space in her writing. Emily Dickinson introduced images of isolation in "Soul selects..." through creating doors and gates. Dickinson gives the opportunity for the Souls to separate herself from the world by shutting those doors. This is mirrored in Virginia Woolf's *A Room of One's Own*. Woolf says "a woman must have money and a room of her own if she is to write fiction." (4) I would say if a woman is to create any type of art, she needs to have a room of her own and her own income. Edna asserts her position as an artist by moving out of Léonce's house, by owning her own space.

Archetypal Approach

An examination of archetypes in *The Awakening* in relation to the theme of home and homelessness is very appropriate for the sole fact that archetypes and cultural artifacts would be different in Edna's home culture and in a Creole culture. Home implies origin and different

archetypes that surround Edna when she feels at home and when she feels alienated. Archetypal criticism grew out of the study of anthropology, which at the end of the nineteenth century studies “primitive origins of religion in magic, ritual, and myth” and explained that cultures carry through certain archetypes which show in their literature. (Guerin) I believe that Edna’s history—her Midwestern origin, American woman amidst a patriarchal society, thrown into a Creole culture—shows through the archetypes that Chopin introduces in the story. Edna is amidst a set of archetypes that, on one side, are pointing to her home and, on the other side, alienate her from her new society.

First, Edna is a scapegoat of Creole society. Because she doesn’t behave the way they expect and wife and a mother to behave, even Mrs. Ratignolle says that if Edna doesn’t stop keeping company with Alcee, she “shan’t be able to come back and see [her]; it [Edna’s behavior] was very, very imprudent to-day” (Chapter thirty three). By giving up Edna’s company, who is out of place in their society, Creoles seem to believe that their order of life would be rejuvenated.

In a way, Creole culture has similar values with the primitive cultures. Guerin refers to Frazier in his chapter “Mythical and Archetypal Approaches” and says that “food and children are the primary needs for human survival” of ancient peoples. It seems to be the same for the Creole society in the end of the nineteenth century Louisiana. The life and survival of the Creole culture seems to be based on economic values and raising children. Creoles also seem to be very open about their sexuality. In the film, Robert says “We’re looser somehow, we laugh, we flirt.” This behavior is not native for Edna, which is why in many ways she gets lost in this confusing environment.

Second, the archetypal motif of heroic journey from home to foreign culture and the struggle to reach the feeling of being at home seeps through the plot. Edna's move from Kentucky to Louisiana, from Protestantism to Catholicism, from Midwestern culture to Southern life, from city to summer house and back all suggest her heroic journey. Each pair of final destinations includes a native and a foreign component. Edna is at home in Kentucky, in a meadow, but she is a foreigner in Louisiana. Even Adele, a close friend says about Edna "She's not like us; she is not one of us" (*Grand Isle*). In religious sense, Edna feels trapped during Catholic mass. "A feeling of oppression and drowsiness overcame Edna during the service." She doesn't feel comfortable in the church, and, as the film version of the novel portrays it—the incense and the priest's motions have a hypnotically frightening effect on her. While she is to feel at home even in the house of God, she doesn't seem to care for religion, and she feels restless in the church.

Next, the archetypal imagery reflects Edna's feelings of homelessness and her search for her place in the world. For instance, the most obvious and vivid archetype is water—a symbol of "the mystery of creation; ...purification and redemption; fertility and growth" and, according to Jung, the symbol for the unconscious. (Guerin 150) The water for Edna is equal to the meadow at home—it is a reflection of her past life, an opportunity to escape her homeless existence. Furthermore, Guerin says that the sea is the mother of life, death and rebirth. It is interesting to me that Edna was happy closer to birth, when she was a young girl, and gets unhappier with age. She is happy again when she returns to the beginning, the sea, the home of birth and death. She returns to the sea several times throughout the novel and again at the end to do her final swim.

"The voice of the sea is seductive; never ceasing, whispering, clamoring, murmuring, inviting the soul to wander for a spell in abysses of solitude; to lose itself in mazes of inward

contemplation.” The sea here is a space inside Edna. If one is able lose herself in “the mazes of inward contemplation,” the sea here is presented as a room, a maze in itself. “The soul” is a common archetype for a female person, so there is no doubt that the soul that would be wondering around trying to find its home would be Edna. By speaking in terms of spaces, Chopin shows us that home is not a particular place, but it’s a feeling of comfort and safety. It can be living in one’s house, swimming in the sea, or floating in one’s dreams.

Edna likes to daydream about the days when the aimless wandering about a meadow felt like home. She says, “I felt as if I must walk on forever.” She was comfortable and happy in the meadow. Then when Edna is analyzing her memories as a similarity to the image of the sea, she gets a glimpse of the unconscious, which the archetype of the sea represents.

Then, of course, there are the archetypes of the house and the garden. A large house represents the large world that Edna can’t place herself within. A small house represents her containment and satisfaction with herself. “The pigeon house pleased her. It at once assumed the intimate character of a home, while she herself invested it with a charm which it reflected like a warm glow.” The light in archetypes represents creative energy and consciousness. (Guerin 150) Edna becomes a person of her own, and it shown in her home, which in its turn nurtures her creative drive. Moreover, Chopin calls her new home both “intimate” and “home.” It is a new feeling for Edna and a new type of residence. The contradiction in Edna’s character is that she feels free in the home of the wild fields, but she also finds comfort in the small confined spaces. She likes to snuggle up in her bed and enjoys likes living in a small house. She also admired Mademoiselle Reisz’s apartment. She likes that there is “plenty of windows” and “the light and air that came through them.” Edna left her big elaborate house to spend time in Mademoiselle Reisz’s tiny apartment.

One of the most interesting archetypes that are related to the theme of home is the archetype of a woman. Good mother versus bad mother archetypes are conflicted in the novel. A good mother is the one protecting and building a home. A bad mother, on the other hand is a witch, a sorceress, sensual woman who abandons her motherly and wifely responsibilities. To her husband, Edna is the archetypal bad mother; to me she is a good mother because she carries the protective and loving features that a good mother requires. She is a bad mother because she doesn't attend to her husband's house, but, if she could look into the future, she would realize that women in the twentieth century have discovered that being a good mother also entails becoming a professional.

I find it interesting that the archetype of a garden, a place of paradise, innocence, unspoiled beauty (Guerin 153) shows up in several places in the novel. First, Edna is neglectful to her garden; she "absently picked a few sprays of Jessamine... and thrust it into the bosom of her white morning gown" (chapter eighteen). When she was finally left alone at the house and she was free, however, "the flowers were like new acquaintances; she approached them in a familiar spirit, and made herself at home among them" (chapter twenty four). She is in paradise in the garden, at home. She attends to her garden, "digging around the plants." It is a superficial type of attention, but she is at least interacting with the nature and doesn't dismiss it. At last, the garden belongs to her and she is "at home." She feels like she also belongs to the garden.

Another set of archetypes that I particularly noticed being portrayed in the film version of the novel are the archetypes of colors. The color of clothing reflects the state of being. When Edna is still looking for her place in the universe, she wears white dresses and hats. When she swims and is close to feeling at home, she wears black swimming suite. Even during the summer, she gradually changes her dress colors from white to light blue to grey to black. A part

of this transformation is the change of season, but a large part of this change in colors is the change in personalities and attitudes. Mademoiselle Reisz, for instance, is always wearing dark colors unlike all of the other Creole women because she is unlike any other Creole woman. The archetype of white is a controversial symbol in itself, according to Guerin. On one hand, white is “signifying light, purity, innocence and timelessness.” (151) On the other hand, white can mean terror, death, the supernatural, and inevitability of the power of the universe. In a way, wearing white for Edna is a reflection of both meanings of the archetype. First, she is representing her ignorance about her situation, she is an example of artificial purity in the Creole society. At the same time, when she is wearing white, she is slowly dying, going with the downward flow of society around her. She knows she is out of place, out of her comfort zone, but she continues on wearing white until she is back in the city and she changes her disposition toward life and the colors of her clothing. White to some extent becomes a color of conformity. Black means both evil and wisdom, which I think Edna represents as she becomes a new woman. She is wiser, but she becomes a threat to the order of the Creole society. She is an outsider, which the colors reflect her position in society. When Edna is free of all social and personal ties, when she is going for her last swim, she leaves all of the colors behind—both light colored dress and black swimming suite.

Finally, we can use archetypal theory to trace a line between the seasons, the types of homes that Edna finds and the genre that Chopin utilizes. When Edna is at the beach, the myths of summer are present. She exists in a light house with her own room, in bath houses, in the sea. We can trace the genre of romance during the summer months. When Edna returns to the city, she is confined to the house she hates, she is sad and the fall season all contribute to the genre of tragedy. In the spring, Edna finds herself a new home, a new life, and the genre is comedy. The

application of the genre of comedy here is problematic because *The Awakening* isn't a comedy, but the mood and Edna's occupations are much lighter than those during the winter. In the summer, Edna falls back into a romance with Robert. But, at the same time, she is experiencing a tragic breakup, which leads her to suicide in the fall--the tragic genre.

Evaluation

In conclusion, Kate Chopin's novel offers plenty of material to analyze through many critical approaches. The theme of home and homelessness can be easily viewed through New Historicism, Code Analysis, Reader-Oriented Criticism, Psychoanalytical Criticism, but viewing the theme through feminist perspective offers not only the analysis of Edna as a woman, but the understanding of women and their relationship to spaces in the nineteenth century. Likewise, a lot of the archetypes that spring from male-based literature are juxtaposed to the images of homes in Edna's life. She is surrounded by archetypes, and each part of her surroundings is an archetype. I think the best way in which the feminist and the archetypal approaches connect for me is in the discussion of the archetypes of good and bad women. The archetypes are connected to a home and responsibility of a woman in a home—a child bearer and a housekeeper. These archetypes seem to be developed by men, so connecting feminism to them seemed natural.

The more time I spend re-reading Chopin's work, the more amazed I am at her ability to include so many details into the narrative. Chopin is very precise at naming the New Orleans house "the house" and "his [Léonce's] home," but not "Edna's house," and definitely not "her home." I like that the images of home come through means other than buildings—they come through the sea, the grasses, and the art. I picked such an elusive image on purpose, I wanted something that is not easy to figure out, but fascinating to investigate. I think analyzing Edna's

situation and her alienation from the culture she is in made me appreciate my own situation.

Edna doesn't have her parents' home to return to and she doesn't have a future in her pigeon house. She has no resolution to her feeling of being a foreigner.

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