
UNDERSTANDING LIFE AND DEATH MEANING THROUGH THE CHARACTER OF EDNA PONTELLIER IN *THE AWAKENING* BY KATE CHOPIN

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ABSTRACT

A character in a story has its own personality traits, therefore, the existence of one is significant to the plot. Some variables, such as genes and environment, impact the development of a character's personality. Though Psychological approach, the researcher examines the personality development of the main character of Edna Pontellier in Kate Chopin's *The Awakening*. From analyzing the character development, the researcher finds that the character of Edna Pontellier has changed and developed from accepting of the life that she has to becoming rebellious in the search of her independence. Due to this, the point of view of life and death in the story is also changed. Somehow, Edna chooses death as a way to find happiness.

Keywords: *character; environment; life and death; personality development*

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INTRODUCTION

Literature, including science, attempts to explain the society in which we exist and to interpret our own roles as participants in the life experiences (Skelton, 2003, p. 213). There is no doubt that every role has each characteristic which is shaped by and through each own experience. Pikunas (1961) states that there are two things that shape the personality of a character which are heredity and environment. Heredity or usually called genes are come from the parents or ancestors. At the same time, the environment shapes

every individual through family, friends, community, and culture (p. 58).

A literature can be analyzed in an intrinsic or extrinsic way. According to Nur (2017), intrinsic elements in literature are plot, theme, point of view, settings character and characterization, and symbol (p. 2). Meanwhile, the extrinsic elements in a literature are the historical background and author background. If a researcher wants to analyze a literature in intrinsic way, a researcher can analyze the intrinsic elements and connect it with the extrinsic elements. A

character normally changes along the story. The changes can be a development. The changes also depend on how story begins and how the story ends, too. It is because a character is a representative of a story who later the reader will interpret the value of the story from the character (Abrams, 1999, pp. 32-33).

From the story, Edna Pontellier as a main character in the novel, changes or develops her character because of her reaction toward new environment. As the result, the character of Edna Pontellier develops into Edna who is different from the beginning of the story. This research discusses how the environments in the novel develop the main character and how it also influences to the meaning of life and death according to Edna Pontellier. It is because the main character is one of the important elements in the novel, it is worth discussing the process on how the environment actually shapes the character of Edna Pontellier in the story. Edna Pontellier, as the novel has told the reader, is married to Léonce and has two children. On another hand, her friend, Adèle, is the ideal New Orleans mother, a model of flawless parenthood with Madonna-like attributes that Edna has no desire to emulate. Madame Ratignolle has three children and has been married for seven years, and she expects another. Adèle has spent nearly her whole married life pregnant. Unlike Edna, Adèle is pleased with her pregnancy and dedicated to her children and husband. Madame Ratignolle is as pleased with her marriage as Edna is with hers, but Edna cannot understand that she is simply different from Madame Ratignolle. (Metzger, 2001, p. 6) Therefore, as a woman, Edna feels something is missing. When the family goes to a summer holiday at Grand Isle, she meets

Robert. She spends time with him a lot meanwhile her husband is busy with his own business. Edna feels something different that she never has when she is with his husband. When she meets Mademoiselle Reisz, she also feels that she can express herself more than before. Edna decides to become an independent woman by leaving her family behind. She expresses herself through painting and her love for arts and music. She is awakened. The climax happens when Robert asks her to become his wife. However, Edna does not want to belong to anyone as she wants to live independently. She loves herself more than anything. However, her act is considered as rebellion toward the world and her nature as a French Creole woman. As stated in Metzger (2021) that Chopin was concerned in women's personal liberties, and the story might be viewed as a defense of a woman's self-awareness and independence (p. 6). It gives an idea that she feels confused. Then, she thinks that the people do not agree with what she has done, she decides to “end” her life by swimming into the ocean.

Through a psychological approach, a character in the story can be analyzed. According to Aras (2015),

There is a very strong correlation between literature and psychology for the fact that both of them deal with human beings and their reactions, perceptions of the world, miseries, wishes, desires, fears, conflicts and reconciliations; individual and social concerns, by means of varied concepts, methods, and approaches. An author represents life according to his/her objectives, perceptions, ideologies, and value judgments and opens the doors of the unknown and invisible worlds to readers not only by arousing feelings and emotions but also by helping them to discover the meaning of life and

existence. Clearly, literature enables individuals to know and question their identities by raising consciousness and awareness. It is to be noted that man and existence have always been fundamental elements in most scientific studies, fine arts and literature (Aras, 2015, p. 251).

Aras also adds that by using Freudian psychoanalytic approaches, psychoanalytical critics reflect not only the author's mind and personality, but also the author's works as products or texts of the power of imagination, which is crucial for individuals, including artists and authors, in the process of creation. Within this context, it is critical to emphasize that both literature and psychology appeal to the imagination and sentiments. Psychology plays an important role in literary analysis, and each area places the individual at the center of their research and analyses. Psychoanalytic criticism is concerned with characters that serve as symbols of the world and existence and are offered as example individuals in order to reveal the meaning of life. The author's views, dreams, conscious or unconscious thoughts, and discrepancies between the author's personality and the author in the work are all taken into account (p. 252).

In other words, at the same topic, Tyson (2015) explains two important grounds in analyzing the behavior, which are:

(1) when we psychoanalyze literary characters, we are not suggesting that they are real people but that they represent the psychological experience of human beings in general; and (2) it is just as legitimate to psycho-analyze the behavior represented by literary characters as it is to analyze their behavior from a feminist, Marxist, or African American critical perspective, or from the perspective of any critical theory that analyzes literary

representations as illustrations of real-life issues (p. 34).

As a result, both literature and psychology have a good compatibility since the way they see characters in literary world is comparable and may borrow concepts from one another to provide different interpretations and viewpoints. It is detectable; thus, the ability of each field to apply diverse methodologies and approaches to analyze human nature and existence is a shared trait of psychology and literature (Aras, 2015, p. 256).

In other words, literature is more than simply an emotional assault. Emotions are not just expressed in excellent writing (Skelton, 2003, p. 211). Literature impacts our emotions, which many people believe is its most important quality. However, the power of the arts is ambiguous. It has the potential to blind the reader to emotive garbage (p. 212). One of the primary functions of literature is to put order on life and death, providing both significance (p. 213). However, death serves numerous purposes in literature. In other words, death and dying have several functions in literary context (p. 215). In this paper, the researcher explains the characteristics of the main character develop in the novel. Furthermore, the researcher also examines the meaning of life and death through the main character in the novel.

DISCUSSION

The Beginning of Life

After analyzing the novel, the researcher finds that the character of Edna is shaped through her environment. The environment here is the other characters in the novel. First

environment is her family, which is her husband and her children. Her husband, Mr. Pontellier, is a sarcastic person. In the beginning of the story when the Pontelliers spend their summer holiday in Grand Isle, the family stays at one of the cottages there. Because it is summer, Edna spends most of her time at the beach. There, she meets Robert Lebrun who teaches her to swim in the sea. However, Léonce, the husband, does not seem to be interested in spending the holiday with the family. When Edna and Robert come back to the cottage from the beach, her husband seems to not like it. He says,

“What folly! to bathe at such an hour in such heat!” exclaimed Mr. Pontellier. He himself had taken a plunge at daylight. That was why the morning seemed long to him.

“You are burnt beyond recognition,” he added, looking at his wife as one looks at a valuable piece of personal property which has suffered some damage (Gilbert, 2002, p. 39).

As husband, Léonce seems upset that her wife spends her time at the beach in a very hot weather for swimming until Edna’s skin turns to red. Léonce throws sarcastic words as an expression that he does not like what his wife does. However, Edna does not care about what her husband says. She keeps talking to Mr. Leburn. That situation makes Léonce bored. Therefore, Léonce decides to go to Klein’s hotel to play billiard. He also asked Robert to come with him, but Mr. Leburn seems to be interested in chatting with Mrs. Pontellier.

“What is it?” asked Pontellier, looking lazily and amused from one to the other. It was some utter nonsense; some adventure out there in the water, and they both tried to relate it at once. It did not seem half so amusing when told.

They realized this, and so did Mr. Pontellier. He yawned and stretched himself. Then he got up, saying he had half a mind to go over to Klein’s hotel and play a game of billiards.

“Come go along, Lebrun,” he proposed to Robert. But Robert admitted quite frankly that he preferred to stay where he was and talk to Mrs. Pontellier.

“Well, send him about his business when he bores you, Edna,” instructed her husband as he prepared to leave.

Before he goes to Klein’s Hotel, Edna still asks him if he wants to come back for a dinner. Mr. Pontellier answers with his body which telling her that he might come home for a dinner, or he might not (Gilbert, 2002, p. 40). Upon the chatting between two of them, Mrs. Pontelliers says,

...about her father’s Mississippi plantation and her girlhood home in the old Kentucky blue-grass country. She was an American woman, with a small infusion of French which seemed to have been lost in dilution. She read a letter from her sister, who was away in the East, and who had engaged herself to be married.

She tells it to Mr. Leburn as if they have known each other for a long time. Mr. Leburn is interested and curious about Mrs. Pontellier at the same time (Gilbert, 2002, p. 42).

After analyzing Edna’s first environment, Edna begins to develop a character of being ignorant. It is seen as a defense mechanism of Edna toward her husband. The initial conflict begins when Mr. Pontellier comes back home from Klein’s hotel. He is very talkative telling his wife about what has happened at Klein’s hotel. Meanwhile, Edna has slept and wakes up directly because of that. However, the wife ignores the husband. Mr. Pontellier forgets to

bring candies for his children, but he does not forget to check them at their room where they sleep. Then, Léonce comes back to his room again telling Edna that one of the children has a fever. Edna ignores him because she is sure that no one has any fever because they feel asleep well. However, Mr. Pontellier wants his wife to wake up to check on the kids. The author states in the story that

He reproached his wife with her inattention, her habitual neglect of the children. If it was not a mother's place to look after children, whose on earth was it? He himself had his hands full with his brokerage business. He could not be in two places at once; making a living for his family on the street, and staying at home to see that no harm befell them. He talked in a monotonous, insistent way.

Mrs. Pontellier sprang out of bed and went into the next room. She soon came back and sat on the edge of the bed, leaning her head down on the pillow. She said nothing, and refused to answer her husband when he questioned her. When his cigar was smoked out he went to bed, and in half a minute he was fast asleep (p. 43).

Actually, Edna does not completely asleep. She is half awake and she starts to cry. She has not felt that kind of feeling before since they are married and have kids. She does not understand what kind of feeling she has, but she also feels oppressed.

She could not have told why she was crying. Such experiences as the foregoing were not uncommon in her married life. They seemed never before to have weighed much against the abundance of her husband's kindness and a uniform devotion which had come to be tacit and self-understood.

An indescribable oppression, which seemed to generate in some unfamiliar part of her consciousness, filled her

whole being with a vague anguish. It was like a shadow, like a mist passing across her soul's summer day. It was strange and unfamiliar; it was a mood (Gilbert, 2002, p. 44).

The morning after, Léonce goes back to the town for his business leaving Edna and the children in the Grand Isle to spend the rest of summer holiday there. Mr. Pontellier always leaves some money for his wife, and it improves Edna's mood. The night before, she cries, but after her husband gives her some money, her mood suddenly changes. Her satisfaction increases when she receives a package from her husband filled with fruits and sweets (Gilbert, 2002, p. 45). Many people say that Mr. Pontellier is a good husband, and because of that, many ladies are envious toward Mrs. Pontellier.

Edna is not only being ignorant but Edna also being careless. In the story, Mrs. Pontellier is not the kind of woman who always takes care of her husband and her children in many ways. The author explains that

If one of the little Pontellier boys took a tumble whilst at play, he was not apt to rush crying to his mother's arms for comfort; he would more likely pick himself up, wipe the water out of his eyes and the sand out of his mouth, and go on playing. Tots as they were, they pulled together and stood their ground in childish battles with doubled fists and uplifted voices, which usually prevailed against the other mother-tots. The quadroon nurse was looked upon as a huge encumbrance, only good to button up waists and panties and to brush and part hair; since it seemed to be a law of society that hair must be parted and brushed.

The mother-women seemed to prevail that summer at Grand Isle. It was easy to know them, fluttering about with

extended, protecting wings when any harm, real or imaginary, threatened their precious brood. They were women who idolized their children, worshiped their husbands, and esteemed it a holy privilege to efface themselves as individuals and grow wings as ministering angels (p. 46).

Unlike Mrs. Pontellier, Madame Ratignolle, her best friend, really likes to take care of her family. She loves the duty of being a wife. She loves sewing, too, and sometimes, she likes to ask Mrs. Pontellier to join her. At Grand Isle, Mrs. Pontellier, Mr. Leburn, and Madame Ratignolle form a small club where they always hang out together every evening to do something. Madame Ratignolle will sew while Mrs. Pontellier and Mr. Leburn will just chat as they have always done (p. 48).

The Main Character Development

The initial conflict is actually one of the clues for Mrs. Pontellier to be awakened. Because she spends so much time to be with Robert, she enjoys his company. The author explains

In short, Mrs. Pontellier was beginning to realize her position in the universe as a human being, and to recognize her relations as an individual to the world within and about her. This may seem like a ponderous weight of wisdom to descend upon the soul of a young woman of twenty-eight—perhaps more wisdom than the Holy Ghost is usually pleased to vouchsafe to any woman (p. 52).

When Mrs. Pontellier and Madame Ratignolle spend their time at the beach with their kids, Mrs. Pontellier recalls her childhood memories when she used to live in Kentucky. She feels happy back then when she was a child. Now, she is married to her

husband, she kinds of lose that happy feeling. It does not the same anymore.

According to Aras (2015), Psychoanalytic criticism is concerned with characters that serve as symbols of the world and existence and are offered as example individuals in order to reveal the meaning of life (Aras, 2015, p. 252). Mrs. Pontellier depicts her life when she was a kid as one of the happiest children. For her, it is really meaningful because she is able to recall those memories when she spends her time at the beach. However, after going through many things in her life and after becoming an adult, her view of life changes, and it is not the same anymore as it used to be. It leaves a meaningful point, also, as it comes to her thought. It means that the character of Mrs. Pontellier has been developed through the changes of her view of life when she was a child and when she has been married.

Mrs. Pontellier meets another person who becomes her role model who is Mademoiselle Reisz through Robert Leburn. Because Robert has to leave to pursue his dream in a far-away town, Mrs. Pontellier loses her company during the summer holiday. Therefore, she decides to hang out with her new best friend, Mademoiselle Reisz, a lot until one day she forgets her duty as a wife. Mademoiselle Reisz introduces her to arts and music which makes Mrs. Pontellier able to express herself more. When Mr. Pontellier finds out about her going out during the day, he feels upset.

“Tired out, Edna? Whom did you have? Many callers?” he asked. He tasted his soup and began to season it with pepper, salt, vinegar, mustard— everything within reach.

“There were a good many,” replied Edna, who was eating her soup with evident

satisfaction. “I found their cards when I got home; I was out.”

“Out!” exclaimed her husband, with something like genuine consternation in his voice as he laid down the vinegar cruet and looked at her through his glasses. “Why, what could have taken you out on Tuesday? What did you have to do?”

“Nothing. I simply felt like going out, and I went out.”

Mr. Pontellier is upset, and he does not stop right there. He even complains about the soup Mrs. Pontellier made. He states that the soup is almost difficult to prepare; it is a surprise that a woman has not learnt to create a nice soup yet. A better one may be found at any free-lunch booth in town (Gilbert, 2002, p. 102). It becomes their second conflict which makes Mrs. Pontellier sad again. Also, she thinks about Robert, her former companion. Even though after she talks to Madame Ratignolle about some of her sketches, she does not even feel too happy toward the compliment.

Edna felt depressed rather than soothed after leaving them. The little glimpse of domestic harmony which had been offered her, gave her no regret, no longing. It was not a condition of life which fitted her, and she could see in it but an appalling and hopeless ennui. She was moved by a kind of commiseration for Madame Ratignolle,—a pity for that colorless existence which never uplifted its possessor beyond the region of blind contentment, in which no moment of anguish ever visited her soul, in which she would never have the taste of life’s delirium. Edna vaguely wondered what she meant by “life’s delirium.” It had crossed her thought like some unsought, extraneous impression (Gilbert, 2002, p. 109).

The visit at Ratignolle’s family does not cheer her mood up. Instead, Edna fights with

Léonce telling how depressed she is, indirectly. Léonce senses that his wife has an imbalance mental health, but he does not understand why that happens to her. At the same time, Edna does not really understand about what actually happens to her situation.

There were days when she was very happy without knowing why. She was happy to be alive and breathing, when her whole being seemed to be one with the sunlight, the color, the odors, the luxuriant warmth of some perfect Southern day. She liked then to wander alone into strange and unfamiliar places. She discovered many a sunny, sleepy corner, fashioned to dream in. And she found it good to dream and to be alone and unmolested.

There were days when she was unhappy, she did not know why,—when it did not seem worth while to be glad or sorry, to be alive or dead; when life appeared to her like a grotesque pandemonium and humanity like worms struggling blindly toward inevitable annihilation. She could not work on such a day, nor weave fancies to stir her pulses and warm her blood (p. 111).

Mrs. Pontellier can only think about one person who will make her understand about herself. That person is Mademoiselle Reisz. Moreover, she wants to find out about Robert’s situation, too. Mademoiselle Reisz tries to give her the idea that everything she has now is not actually hers, but her husband’s. Edna has an idea to begin her independent life. She decides to move out from the house leaving her husband and the kids behind.

Without even waiting for an answer from her husband regarding his opinion or wishes in the matter, Edna hastened her preparations for quitting her home on Esplanade Street and moving into the little house around the block. A feverish

anxiety attended her every action in that direction. There was no moment of deliberation, no interval of repose between the thought and its fulfilment (p 145).

Then, she moves out to begin her independent life without thinking about Léonce. She just wants to be happy by her own.

Aras (2015) mentions that psychoanalytic criticism is concerned with characters that serve as symbols of the world and existence and are offered as example individuals in order to reveal the meaning of life. The author's views, dreams, conscious or unconscious thoughts, and discrepancies between the author's personality and the author in the work are all taken into account (p. 252). In this story, the researcher sees some personalities changing in the main character of Edna Pontellier. In the beginning, she still feels right for what happens to her. She accepts that she is a wife and a mother of two children. Although, she is not the mother-woman type, but she still cares toward her children. Even though her husband sometimes does not respect her in some ways, but she is still happy when she receives money and gifts from her husband. However, after she meets new people during her summer holiday at the Grand Isle, she feels different. She feels confused about her own self. She feels like her situation is not ideal, yet she still does not understand why she still accepts it. After her conversation with Mademoiselle Reisz, she decides to be rebellious. She moves out from her old house to a small apartment leaving her husband and the kids behind. The act of her being rebellious is the development of the Edna's character throughout the story. The development of Edna's personalities means

to show the reader that this novel is worth to read and unique.

Life and Death Meaning

Edna is married to one of French Creole families in New Orleans. Even though she is married to Léonce, she has never felt she belongs to the community. According to the analysis, Mr. Pontellier is one of Edna's environments which has turned Edna into being ignorant and careless. Then, she develops her character into becoming a rebel woman who wants to celebrate her freeform. In contrast, her best friend, Madame Ratignolle is a really dedicated wife for Mr. Ratignolle and belongs to the French Creole Community as well. In other words, Edna does not feel that attached to the community compared to Madame Ratignolle. According to Debois and Melançon (2000),

Creole identity could refer to descendants of the original European colonists in Louisiana - White or Black, slave or free. White descendants of French and Spanish settlers, as well as the descendants of the German, Irish, and Acadian immigrants who came to the state prior to its purchase in 1803, could legitimately call themselves "Creole." In addition, Creole identity could be applicable to the descendants of the gens de couleur libres, the free people of color or "colored Creoles" who were considered the "elite" class of mixed ancestry in New Orleans for several generations (p. 238).

As has been mentioned earlier that Edna is not really into the community, but she is shock due to the fact that many of Creole women are like a pure and unmistakable woman.

There were only Creoles that summer at Lebrun's. They all knew each other, and felt like one large family, among whom existed the most amicable relations. A

characteristic which distinguished them and which impressed Mrs. Pontellier most forcibly was their entire absence of prudery. Their freedom of expression was at first incomprehensible to her, though she had no difficulty in reconciling it with a lofty chastity which in the Creole woman seems to be inborn and unmistakable (Gilbert, 2002, p.48).

However, the problem is also located in the hand of her husband which is too Creole. As the Ratignolle's family who is also Creole, people judge Pontellier's the same. The husband who is always been good to his wife and the wife who dedicates her life for her husband because it is one of the forms to connect themselves with God.

The first argument is that Edna has never been belong to Creole community even though she marries to a Creole husband. It is not because she does not like it, but she just does not enjoy it because she thinks it is not her. She is not like Madame Ratignolle, a mother-woman, who enjoys her life being a wife and a mother. Edna is also a wife and a mother, but it does not mean that she enjoys being at home and taking care the children. Her identity makes her really confused. Therefore, she wants something different. Thankfully, because her family stays at the Grand Isle during their summer holiday, she meets new people from different background. She also learns a lot of things from those people she meets. She feels joy and happy at the same time because she finally gets something she desires. She wants her independency because she cannot take her husband anymore from treating her disrespectfully. She makes a sacrifice leaving her husband and her children to gain her independency.

Her independence life is good. She expresses her sexual desire with a man named Alcée Arobin. However, it is just to satisfy Edna's desire. When Robert Leburn comes back from his long journey, they fall in love again. One day, Robert asks Edna to marry him, but Edna completely refuses his proposal.

"Something put into my head that you cared for me; and I lost my senses. I forgot everything but a wild dream of your some way becoming my wife."

"Your wife!"

"I realized what a cur I was to dream of such a thing, even if you had been willing."

"You have been a very, very foolish boy, wasting your time dreaming of impossible things when you speak of Mr. Pontellier setting me free! I am no longer one of Mr. Pontellier's possessions to dispose of or not. I give myself where I choose. If he were to say, 'Here, Robert, take her and be happy; she is yours,' I should laugh at you both." (Gilbert, 2002, p. 177).

After rejecting the proposal, Edna decides not to be with anyone since she breaks up with her husband, too. She does not want to belong to anyone because she wants to be by her own self.

The second argument is that the decision that Edna has made is also something that makes Edna depressed. Edna really loves Robert. She loves her, but she does not want to be married to him. She just wants to be with him, but Robert thinks differently. After that, Robert decides to leave to take a long journey again. Edna feels upset and depressed. It is like the world does not support what she wants. Her independency is what she wants, but she also wants Robert to be his love. Edna travels back to Grand Isle. She wants to reflect about what actually

happens to her life. She goes for swimming in the ocean. She goes further and

She looked into the distance, and the old terror flamed up for an instant, then sank again. Edna heard her father's voice and her sister Margaret's. She heard the barking of an old dog that was chained to the sycamore tree. The spurs of the cavalry officer clanged as he walked across the porch. There was the hum of bees, and the musky odor of pinks filled the air (Gilbert, 2002, p. 187).

Edna thinks that because the world does not support her, she wants to leave the world. She also wants to find another way so she can be herself. This can be seen from the ending of the story. There has no further explanation for Edna goes for swimming. Because she swims too far, in the story, she never comes back.

The researcher also believes that Edna has died in the ocean because she does not come back to the shore in the end of the story. The researcher thinks that the act of Edna going for a swimming in the ocean and never going back has a function to communicate her will of freedom. Edna feels like the community that she belongs to does not support her. She always wants a freedom, but Edna does not see a chance to do it inside the community. Hence, she chooses to end her life by swimming in the ocean.

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, Edna Pontellier's personality has changed and developed throughout the story. The development of her personality happens because of the people or environment she encounters during her vacation at the Grand Isle. She learns so many things from them. She finally feels the happiness that she has almost forgot about. She meets Mademoiselle Reisz who inspires

her to become independent. She falls in love with Robert Leburn even though they do not end up together in the end.

The development of Edna's character in the story is also causing her decision to end her life. Although she marries a Creole man and gets what she wants, which is a freedom, but she has never belonged to the community. She takes it into personal account. Therefore, she decides to try finding a way to seek her freedom by swimming at the ocean than being alive.

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