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TOPICS AND NARRATIVE STYLE IN *THE AWAKENING* AS REFLECTIONS OF THE PROTAGONIST'S STRUGGLE FOR FREEDOM

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1. Introduction: A Woman Ahead of her Time.

Kate Chopin's *The Awakening* was published in 1899. The analysis of this novel is of great interest for two main reasons: first, it is a novel written by a female author living in a strict patriarchal world, and secondly, its main female character chooses to break free from the subordinate situation that late 19th-century women suffer within the domestic sphere and in society. In fact, *The Awakening* is frequently considered to be a feminist novel because the female protagonist, Edna, finally decides to rebel against her society's strict rules by committing suicide. A simple but comprehensive definition of her condition can be found in the Editor's introduction to *The Routledge Companion to Feminism and Postfeminism*: "A general definition might be stated that it is the belief that women, purely and simply because they are women, are treated inequality within a society which is organised to prioritise male viewpoints and concerns" (vii).

There are scholars such as Ma Yuanxi and Catherine Mainland who have explored this novel from a feminist perspective. Indeed, this literary work was polemic at the time in which it was published and was even criticised by the female reading public. Such problems of popularity may be justified by the actual situation of women in the late 19th-century society. In this period, women were supposed to be submissive and obedient in their role as wives and mothers, therefore abiding by the norms of society. However, Edna decides that the only way out of such condition is to commit suicide since she thinks that by doing this nobody can take control of her life. Edna Pontellier can be, then, considered to be a new woman since she shares the main ideological rights defended by the new woman of her time. As Gamble summarises, the expression "New Woman" was first coined in 1894 by the novelist Sarah Grand in the *North American Review* to grade a sense of modern discontent with the traditional role of women solely as mothers and wives. Thus, the notion implies the existence of other ways for women to fulfil their lives separated from the exclusively and traditional stay-at-home life and, above all, it rejects the patriarchal system (283). The theme of women's rights in the USA at that period had a deep impact in society, as it comprised a wide range of races and social classes. However, for the analysis of Chopin's novel, I will address the issue of feminism mostly regarding the situation of white upper-middle class American women in the last decades of the 19th century.

As regards the structure of this dissertation, it has different parts. Firstly, I briefly discuss the situation of white women since the beginning of the colonial period in New England until the time in which the story of the novel is set, at the end of the 19th century, coinciding with the birth of the New Woman in the USA. This later date represents the first important wave of feminism in the USA and the fight to obtain some fundamental civil liberties for women, such as the right to vote and education. I also discuss the main topics of the novel as well as some aspects of Kate Chopin's life that are relevant for the analysis that is carried out in the subsequent section. Secondly, I analyse the use of different narrative styles in the novel as a strategy that help readers to understand better Edna Pontellier's evolution along the story as a woman who attempts to defy patriarchal rules. Finally, a concluding section summarises the main findings in this dissertation.

2. The Social Context

2.1. The Situation of Women in America between 1620 and 1860

Regarding the historical context, there are some important events in the history of women and feminism in what is now the United States, since its colonial times in the early 17th century until the publication of the novel. It is a well-known fact that the first English colony in New England was set up by a group of dissenters known as the Pilgrim Fathers. As pointed out in the book *Out of Many*, among this group who eventually established their own independent congregation in Massachusetts Bay there were also children and women (Faragher et al. 45). The family economy at the time pointed to the father for the role of breadwinner, while mothers were responsible for housekeeping. Women were not only subordinated to men, but they also had to suffer from a very strict patriarchal system. Along the colonial period, married women could not own property or vote. A young married woman could expect to give birth to eight or more children. Despite such patriarchal rule, it is relevant to mention the poet Anne Bradstreet, considered the first female poet who published her work in New England. Given the expected roles allotted to women at the time, this woman can be thought to be the odd one out.

The Revolution was a turning point for the rights of American women, as many of them had to run alone the farms and businesses. Men had to fight and women somehow began to gain some privileges. It should be added that it was also in actual war contexts that many women began to work as cooks, seamstresses, and other voluntary chores. As the conflict lasted several years, some women went to join their male family members and were officially employed. Two relevant examples of the better-known camp women were Martha Washington and Catherine Greene, whose husbands were some of the most important figures in the war. After the revolution, women gained some privileges, at least in theory, and there was an increasing number of them seeking education, as well as a fairer position in case they wanted to get a divorce. Moreover, they could also marry whom they wished, even a person with a different social status (Faragher et al. 124). In practice, however, the situation of women did not improve much regarding their actual rights because of the patriarchal attitudes of men. Even though there were some wealthy single women, they did not have the right to vote. Legally, the husband would keep the children in the event of divorce. Moreover, women were not granted other important legal rights; their husbands would keep their properties, and they could not testify on their own behalf in court. White wives had to accept this situation, but this circumstance was even worse for black women, slaves, and immigrant women from other minorities.

At the beginning of the 19th century, it was noticeable a big change regarding the number of children a middle-class family had since this issue was frequently planned. From this moment onwards, contraceptive methods began to play a relevant role. Therefore, the average number of children descended from seven or eight in the 18th century to four or five at the beginning of the 19th century (Faragher et al. 233). At the same time, some women had the need to feel free not bearing many children; they wished not to have so many responsibilities. That is, they wanted to redefine their lives and their sexuality. These women were often described as immoral or even “fallen” (Faragher et al. 233).

The tasks of the middle-class women were frequently linked to the education of their children. Women formed maternal associations to help and raise their children, especially sons since girls stayed in the maternal house to be educated and to learn domestic tasks exclusively. However, the progressive rise of the Women’s Rights

Movement was bound to put an end to women's acceptance and promotion of their role as housekeepers. In the summer of 1848, a first Woman's Rights Convention took place in Seneca Falls, New York, where some important subjects were discussed concerning the social, labour, and religious rights of woman. Over 300 people attended the Seneca Falls Convention. Its final resolution denounced that men had deprived women of legal rights such as the right to education, the custody of children in case of divorce, the right to have their own property, or the right to vote, among others. In sum, the reforming women of Seneca Falls had gathered a group of people on behalf of a deep social change, which can also be considered the rise of the first wave of feminism (Faragher et al. 246). Over the years, the situation of women would seem to improve, but they still had to face a crude reality to gain the same rights as men in a deeply patriarchal society. Finally, in 1920 female suffrage was enacted in the Nineteenth Amendment to the Constitution, seventy-two years after it was first proposed at Seneca Falls (Faragher et al. 252).

Between the 1830s and the 1850s, there is a number of important works written by women, which reflected the social and ideological reality of the period, such as Margaret Fuller's essay *Woman in the Nineteenth Century* (1845). At the beginning of the 1830s, there came to light the so-called "Women's novels," such as Catharina Maria Segdwick's *Clarence* (1830), Susan Warner's *The Wide Wide World* (1851), and Maria Cummins's *The Lamplighter* (1854). These authors were innovative for their time, since they wrote about heroines rather than male characters. In addition, there should be a reference to Harriet Beecher Stowe, who wrote one of the most popular novels in American history: *Uncle Tom's Cabin* (1852). Finally, Kate Chopin's *The Awakening* was released in 1899. Before the section dedicated to the analysis of the novel, there will be a brief overview of Kate Chopin's life.

2.2. Kate Chopin: A Woman Raised by Women

This subsection provides a summarised account of the author's biography drawing mainly on Emily Toth's *Unveiling Kate Chopin*. Kate O'Flaherty was born on February 8, 1850 in Sant Louis, Missouri. Her father was a well-educated, grumpy and rigid Irish man and her mother was a Creole whose English always had a French tingle. Catherine was their first daughter and was soon sent to a boarding house. In 1855 Thomas O'Flaherty died in a train

accident and, now that Catherine's mother had legal control over her children, she decided to bring her daughter Katie back home (1-10). What really had an effect on Kate's life is that the death of her father allowed her to return home, where she did not receive a typical patriarchal education. As Toth contends, "Her father's death kept Kate O'Flaherty from growing up in the typical nineteenth-century patriarchal household, in which a powerful husband ruled the roost – as Léonce Pontellier tries to do in, strutting and fuming, in *The Awakening*" (11). Kate receives, therefore, a different education in which strong women usually take their own decisions. Her home was a house of women. Kate learned how to play the piano and learned perfect French. In high school, she took extra music lessons. All this is depicted in the female character of Edna Pontellier in *The Awakening*: "as a mature writer she described the trembling emotional impact of music on such sensitive souls as Edna in *The Awakening*" (13). In Kate Chopin's finest stories of the Civil War, she wrote about what she remembers from the war: terror, loss and time of mourning. She was a kind of celebrity in the last years of school because of her creative writings. On June 29, 1868, Kate graduated at Sacred Heart and entered St. Louis society to begin a new life (Toth 44).

It is not clear when she met her husband Oscar Chopin, whose ancestors were from France. They probably met in winter of 1869 in a ball and married on June 9th of the same year. Now, she was Mrs Chopin, no longer Miss Katy. After visiting many landmarked places during their honeymoon, they settled in St. Louis at a time in which she was already pregnant. During her marriage, she would go frequently for a solitary stroll around New Orleans, usually unescorted. They had six children and as regards the marriage: "Kate was devoted to Oscar and thought him perfect" (72). It seems she loved him very much and they had a happy and creative life where they preferred to be together rather than with friends. When her husband died, Kate went back to live with her mother to St Louis where she brought up her children and began to write successfully. Kate Chopin died when she was only fifty-four in St Louis on February 22, 1904.

3. Main Topics of the Novel

3.1. *Edna's Feeling of Isolation*

At this point, I will focus on the main events and symbolism that may offer reasons to explain the protagonist's tragic ending. The first symbolic object that may attract the reader's attention is a cage in which there is a parrot: "a green and yellow parrot, which, hung in a cage outside the door, kept repeating over and over: 'Allez vous-en! Allez vous-en Sapristi! That's all right!'" (4). The cage stands for prison and, as such it denotes lack of freedom. In addition, readers are informed that the parrot does not only speak in French – its words in the quotation above can be translated as "Go away, go away" – but also in Spanish, as shown in the following line: "He could speak a little Spanish, and also a language which nobody understood." This is an interesting point that may force the reader to reflect on the kind of terminology that Chopin has decided to use in order to highlight Edna's feeling of isolation. Thus, the fact that the parrot could speak a little Spanish and that nobody could understand it may lead to the idea that nobody among Edna's family and friends could really understand the kind of life she wanted to lead. Perhaps, Edna is only pretending to be a good mother and wife at the beginning of the first chapters in the novel. For the better or for the worse, this behaviour seems to be the only way out she knows.

Her feeling of isolation increases due to the lack of communication that exists in her marriage. Maybe Mr Pontellier's patriarchal points of view and egotism make it impossible. One example could be the silenced answer Mr Pontellier gives to his wife when she asks him: "Coming back to dinner?" (5). He decided not to say anything because "it all depended upon the company which he found over at Klein's and the size of 'the game'" (5). There is no answer, only a patriarchal silence since it depends on the kind of people he can encounter there and the luck he may have with the ten-dollar bill he has found in his pocket before living his home. It is a constant in the Victorian novel that men did not show much interest in their wives, especially at the weekends.

However, the lack of communication is not the only problem in her marriage, as her husband also feels discomfort. He does not approve of Edna's behaviour. This is shown at the beginning of the novel when "Mr. Pontellier, unable to read his newspaper with any degree of comfort, arose with an expression and an exclamation of disgust!" (4). Thus, for

the reader the scene represents a first negative opinion about Edna's husband. The discomfort he feels because she does not represent the perfect Victorian wife may be the reason why he also seems to ignore her and treat her as if she was just another of his possessions. One night when he arrives from the nightclub, he ignores that his wife is asleep: "his entrance awoke his wife, who was in bed and fast asleep when he came in" (9). He does not consider that she is sleeping and, therefore, he is not careful and makes noise, awakening her. He may consider her wife to be a possession that can be ignored, used or even abused whenever he desires. He also thinks that he should be her centre of attention: "He thought it very discouraging that his wife, who was the sole object of his existence, evinced so little interest in things which concerned him, and valued so little his conversation" (9). By doing this, the reader is openly informed of his egotism. He would have her listen and be answered at any moment he wishes.

In the dialogue, this idea is also highlighted by the fact that he considers that Raoul, one of his children, is ill: "Raoul had a high fever and needed looking after" (9). He explains that to his wife but he does not care long about it: "Then he lit a cigar and sat near the open door to smoke it." In addition, he has forgotten to bring "the bonbons and peanuts for the boys," as he had promised earlier to his children. This also reinforces the idea of a self-centred person. Mr. Pontellier normally reproaches his wife her lacks of interest in their children: "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?" (9). This kind of observations makes Edna feels uncomfortable and sad, and she normally cries: "She began to cry a little, and wiped her eyes on the sleeve of her peignoir" (9). She prefers not to say anything to her husband because wives during this time were supposed to be obedient and submissive.

3.2. Edna's Attitude towards Motherhood

Gradually, objects, events and ironic comments on the part of the narrator allow readers to become aware of Mrs. Pontellier's non-traditional attitude towards her children and the kind of new woman she is: "Mrs. Pontellier was not a mother-woman. The mother-woman

seemed to prevail that summer at Grand Isle. 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” (12). In this sense, Amanda Rooks argues that Chopin’s novel “brings the mother figure back to the narrative center and attempts to revive her via a focus on her sexuality” (124). Chopin uses a language frequently ironic to describe the kind of role a “proper” wife was supposed to play. It seems to describe the fairy lady, always accessible to her husband to fulfil every wish he has. This kind of fairy woman is certainly depicted in the case of Adele Ratignolle: “her beauty was all there, flaming and apparent” (12). She embodies the perfect woman. She was a good friend of Edna and normally visited her. She was a good wife with three babies and thinking about having the fourth one. Adele and Edna usually meet in order to sew some baby clothes. Although Edna was not interested in sewing, she liked to be with Adele as she was a talkative and extremely pleasant woman. During the summer, Edna, Adele, and Robert gather in order to spend their time together. Nobody seems to notice the attraction between Edna and Robert: “Robert and Mrs. Pontellier sitting idle, exchanging occasional words, glances or similes which indicated a certain advantage stage of intimacy and camaraderie [...]. He has lived in her shadow during the past month” (14). At this point, the reader gets some hints that the relation between Robert and Edna is much more than mere friendship. This is how Robert’s life in the summer is described: “Robert each summer at Grand Isle had constituted himself the devoted attendant of some fair dame or damsel. Sometimes it was a young girl, again a widow; but as often as not it was some interesting married women” (14). Although he was there with Mrs. Pontellier, Robert had been in love with Madame Ratignolle earlier. However, being in love with Edna Pontellier is going to affect him deeply. It is important to pay attention to the main two female characters: Edna can be considered to be the dark lady while Madame Ratignolle can be described as the fair lady. Another feature of the Victorian novels, in which the differences between two main female characters are highlighted by their likes and dislikes.

One of the consequences of the relationship between Robert and Edna is the deep sense of indecision that will characterise the female protagonist throughout the novel. One clear example of her inability to decide is when she is asked to go to the beach by Robert and she does not feel like swimming that day, but he finally convinces her in a light way:

“Are you going bathing?” asked Robert of Mrs. Pontellier. It was not so much a question as a reminder. –‘Oh, no’, she answered, with a tone of indecision. I’m tired; I think not” (16). This is a clear example of how women normally had to do what men wanted at the exact moment they wanted to. This shows that Edna is not imposing her own wish, but rather the other way around. In the next chapter, her indecision is mentioned again: “She should in the first place have declined, and in the second place have followed in obedience to one of the two contradictory impulses which impelled her” (17). After this moment, Edna is going to feel differently as it is shown in the text. 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” (16). According to Nur, “the experiences in that summer weekend change her thought and mind. She cannot suit to the domestic life of family ... She feels that it is fool for women who pass a life on that way” (7). Given her feeling that she is different from what society dictates, Edna is probably an ambivalent character that at the age of twenty-eight starts to evolve in a clearer way than before. Adele is aware of the fact that Edna is a rather different woman as she asks Robert to leave Edna alone and not to begin going out with her since: “she is not one of us; she is not like us. She might make the unfortunate blunder of taking you seriously” (23). However, Robert wants Edna to take him seriously and not only as a “blagueur.” This was a formal warning to Robert. He is younger than Edna, and consequently a rather immature man.

3.3 Edna’s Interests and Aspirations: The New Woman

As previously mentioned, Edna Pontellier may be understood as a representation of “the new woman”. These women were the first ones to have interests and aspirations other than becoming mothers and doing the housekeeping, defying in that way the patriarchal system. The protagonist’s interests and aspirations extend beyond the activities typically considered to belong to the married woman’s sphere. Edna Pontellier is very fond of the arts, especially painting and music. She enjoys drawing and even she confesses Madame Ratignolle and Mademoiselle Reisz that she would love to be a painter. However, their reactions to Edna’s words differ notably. Although she knows that Madame Ratignolle’s opinion is valueless, she decides to ask for her opinion because she searches “the words of

praise and encouragement that would help her to put her heart into her venture” (62). Whereas Mademoiselle Reisz, the pianist, says to her that she may be very pretentious as “the artist must possess the courageous soul” (70). Mrs. Pontellier is even unable to understand what Mademoiselle Reisz’s words mean so she explains to Edna that a courageous soul is one “that dares and defies” (70). It is clear that Mademoiselle Reisz, who really is an artist, has serious doubts regarding the degree of self-confidence and strength that Edna has.

Edna Pontellier’s taste for music not only reinforces her position as a new woman, but it also points to the author’s life. The importance of the piano is crucial in the novel. Edna is able to appreciate the intensity and depth of Frederic Chopin’s music. The way in which she describes her emotions while listening to Mademoiselle Reisz’s interpretation, is also a reflection of her awakening. When she began to play, Edna felt how “the music grew strange and fantastic- turbulent, insistent, plaintive and soft with entreaty” (70).

With respect to her aspirations, she does not only intent to be someone free to love whoever she wishes, but she also wants to live by her own, in other words, without depending on her husband. Firstly, she has a close friendship with Robert, and later on, with Aleen, who is a womanizer. However, the loss that will determine her outcome will be Robert’s. She does not only try to escape from the patriarchal cage by means of these relationships, but she also moves from her home on Esplanade Street. She confesses that she knows that she “shall like it, like the feeling of freedom and independence” (85). Her interests and aspirations, as can be observed, position her very far from the Victorian prototype of woman and condemn her to isolation and sadness.

4. Narrative Style as Reflection of the Protagonist’s Struggle for Freedom

The novel presents an unknown omniscient narrator who has access to the characters’ minds. Although the story is narrated in chronological order, there is a crucial change in the narrative styles used in order to portray the main character’s evolution. At the beginning of the novel, the narrator shows distance from Edna, a distance that gradually decreases at the

pace that her interior world and her spiritual awakening are revealed. The main narrative styles used in that part of the novel are free indirect style and the narrator's use of reported or indirect speech, which represent a perfect vehicle to portray that distant initial position from the main character. In addition, it should be pointed out the use of parody and irony sometimes in the novel with the aim of showing a critical point of view of the society that conditions and limits Edna. Once readers are aware of the environment that surrounds her, the narrator decides to use dialogues and narrative sympathy towards her while she is becoming aware of her reality. Thus, Edna is given her voice. She speaks now in the first-person as a reflection of her awareness. This use of direct speech creates a sense of closeness and identification with the main character. In the following section, it will be explained how these changes in voice take place in order to portray Edna's evolution in the story and also very briefly, how its circular structure and its tragic ending help to construct the oppressive atmosphere of the novel.

4.1. The narrator's Initial Lack of Sympathy towards Edna and its Subtle Criticism of Patriarchal Society

Free indirect style can be described as “a mixture or merging of character and narrator” in a single sentence (Martin 138-139). The fact that both voices can be perceived, gives readers a sense of distance. Especially, if both do not coincide in their opinions, as happens at the beginning of the novel, when Edna goes to the beach with her friend, Madame Ratignolle. After speaking with her, she remembers the times in which she fell in love and also thinks about the reasons that led her to marry Leonce. “She fancied there was a sympathy of thought and taste between them, in which fancy she was mistaken.” (21) Here, the narrator shows an opinion and thinks that Edna was wrong when she thought that her husband and she shared many things. These opposite points of view mark how far the narrator and Edna are from each other, at least, at the beginning.

Free indirect style is not the only technique regarding voice to generate that sense of detachment. The narrator's use of indirect style or reported speech also reinforces it. This frequent technique consists of keeping in the narrator's voice the words of a character. The most relevant moment in the novel in which this narrative technique appears is during the

first conversation between the couple to which readers have access. When Leonce returns from Klein's hotel, he goes to his children's room to check if they are well. However, he realises that Rauol has a fever and he begins to reproach Edna her lack of attention to them. The whole dialogue is portrayed in indirect style.

Mrs Pontellier was quite sure Raoul had no fever. He had gone to bed perfectly well, she said, and nothing had ailed him all day. Mr Pontellier was too well acquainted with fever symptoms to be mistaken. He assured her the child was consuming at the moment in the next room. (9)

It is notorious the use of reporting verbs, such as "say" or "assure" to make the indirect style possible, as well as some adverbial phrases that offer a valuation of what is expressed. For example, "quite sure," "perfectly well" or "too well." The use of indirect style let readers observe the couple in their private sphere from a distance as the dialogue is not portrayed directly. This distance makes even more striking the problems that exist between them as well as more comprehensible, as readers can understand both sides. Edna does not fit the model of the perfect wife that Mr Pontellier expected. He cannot find an explanation for her attitude. On her part, Edna has very important reasons to behave in such a way.

The distance from Edna maintained by the narrator works in parallel with the critical tone that permeates her voice to question the ideas and conventions of the novel's time. The narrator sometimes makes use of parody, whereas in other cases of irony, in order to offer a critical point of view of society. One of the most relevant examples is when typical high-class women are described.

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. Many of them were delicious in their role. (12)

In this description, the author mocks those women's behaviour. As threats and dangers may be inexistent, their concern is meaningless. Their exaggeration and lack of sense is parodied by evoking their transformation in angels. However, this is not the only thing the author mocks. Their extreme dedication and commitment to their husbands and children are also object of the author's mockery. As the narration moves on, Madame Ratignolle is identified as the greatest model of the perfect woman. She is described as "the embodiment of every

womanly grace and charm.” (12) The parody continues when it is assured that if “her husband did not adore her, he was a brute, deserving of death by slow torture.” (12) Obviously, no woman is so perfect as this description portrays. Moreover, the excessive penalty for not adoring her as she seems to deserve is totally ridiculous.

However, this is not the only time in which women’s behaviour is parodied. It is also used when Edna receives a box with “delicacies” that her husband sent her from New Orleans to describe how her female friends choose the delicacy that they are going to eat.

The pates and fruit were brought to the dining-room; the bonbons were passed around. And the ladies, selecting with dainty and discriminating fingers and a little greedily, all declared that Mr. Pontellier was the best husband in the world. (11)

The way in which her friends choose each delicacy as if they were the most succulent food they ever saw, with a combination of elegance, elitism and greed, is ridiculous. Maybe this insinuates that very expensive and luscious things cause women’s pleasure. In addition, it seems that Edna’s husband is the best one just because he gives her very expensive presents. However, there is not a word in relation to his tenderness and attention. It seems that emotional matters are irrelevant.

Not only parody spreads its colours in the narration, but it also contains some touches of irony. Just as parody is used to criticize the society and its conventions, irony has the same goal. The moment in the story when Edna decides to move to another smaller house and her husband is informed of it provides a good example. In his letter, Mr Pontellier says to his wife that he is not worried about any possible scandal because that is very unlikely considering their name. However, he reproaches her having made such a decision as she did not think about “what people would say” (101) in relation to “the possible questioning of his financial integrity.” (101) It is very surprising that he did not ask her why she decided to abandon the house. He only shows his concern about the rumours that can go around questioning his economic stability and solvency, what may be regarded as an inconsiderate gesture.

The ironic tone is even more remarkable when her husband decides to publish a notice in the newspaper in order to communicate that the reputable Pontellier’s family are going to renew their residence in Esplanade Street. “Sumptuous alterations” (101) are going

to be made so they will not be at home during the summertime. After explaining the content of Mr Pontellier's notice, the narrator makes a very ironic comment: "Mr Pontellier had saved appearances! (101) It is impossible not to notice what he values most in life; luxury, money and good reputation.

Irony permeates the lines of the narration again when Robert, Edna's beloved one, is introduced to readers. Since the age of 15, he "each summer at Grand Isle constitutes himself devoted attendant of some fair dame or damsel." (14) As he is described as devoted attendant, it is impossible not to wonder what his intentions hide behind the mask of extreme dedication. However, it is even more striking the enumeration of the women he usually accompanies, especially regarding the married ones. Sometimes it was a girl, other a widow, "but as often as it was some interesting married woman." (14) In this utterance, the adjective "interesting" brings to the mind negative connotations. Maybe married women that find their lives boring or they like to listen to romantic words in the mouths of other men rather than their husbands. Whatever the intentions of this prostration to the dames' feet are, they seem to be not fair at all. When Mademoiselle Duvigne dies, a woman who has been adored by Robert, he "poses as inconsolable" (14), to run shortly after her death under the shadow of Madame Ratignolle "for whatever crumbs of sympathy and comfort she might be pleased to vouchsafe." (14) At the end, he gives the impression of being a womanizer who likes to play romantic games with any woman who is ready to accept his company, taking into account that most of the time his emotions are not involved in the game.

4.2 The Narrator's Change of Attitude: Closeness and Understanding

Edna's awakening is marked in the novel firstly, by a change in the narrator's attitude toward her and secondly, by the use of direct style to portray dialogues that were previously offered in reported speech at the beginning of the novel. The first narrative styles used (free indirect style and reported speech) created an emotional detachment from the main character, giving readers time to reflect about Edna's situation and environment, a social reality questioned and criticised by the narrator. Once readers know about Edna's

loneliness and unsatisfied emotional needs, the narrator begins to show sympathy and understanding toward her. In fact, the narrator is even able to see in advance what Edna still has not realised. It is the first one to announce her emotional awakening and its possible consequences to the readers.

She could only realise that she herself -her present self- was in some way different from the other self. That she was seeing with different eyes and making the acquaintance of new conditions in herself that coloured and changed her environment, she did not yet suspect. (46)

Just a few chapters later, the narrator once again enters her mind demonstrating an overall understanding of Edna's feelings. The narrator shows an enormous sympathy towards her. This notably differs from the initial distant attitude, which was almost limited to convey her frustration and loneliness. After visiting Madame Ratignolle's home, Edna thinks about what she has witnessed. The perfect image of domestic harmony that she has observed, gives her "no regret, no longing" (62). She thinks that it does not fit her. In fact, the only thing she can see in it is "an appalling and hopeless ennui" (62). At this moment, the narrator offers readers the exact feelings of Edna. She believes that living in that way one never "has the taste of life's delirium" (62).

The narrator's change is complete when she gives voice to Edna. Thus, Edna begins to speak using the first-person pronoun, I, to express her new spiritual realization. Now, the dialogues are portrayed in direct style that let readers feel the scene as close as possible, listening to Edna without any kind of filter. While talking to Madame Ratignolle, she says: "I would give up the unessential; I would give my money, I would give my life for my children: but I wouldn't give myself. (53) It is said almost unconsciously, because shortly after, she admits that she is "beginning to comprehend" (53).

She is giving the first steps to understand that she is not only a mother and a wife, but she is also more than the limited role that life imposes on her. She can do other sort of things and make decisions, including to choose freely who to love. She is not a possession that passes from her father's to her husband's hand. As she clearly states at the end of her awakening, while she speaks with Robert, who has confesses her his feelings: "I'm not longer one of Mr Pontellier's possessions to dispose of or not. I give myself where I choose" (117). Now, she has realised that she is an independent person who has her own

feelings, desires and rights. An individual person that having acquired their own voice, speaks in her own voice, expressing with amazing clarity what she thinks and feels. However, the awakening also brings a personal crisis with it. It is not easy to become somebody who goes against the conventions of the time. That explains why there is a moment in which Edna says: “By all the codes which I am acquainted with, I am a devilishly wicked specimen of the sex.” (89) With respect to all that she has been taught, who she has become is regarded as evil. Nevertheless, her new eyes have opened to the world, so nothing can be the same as before.

4.3 A Prognosticated Outcome

Although Edna opens new eyes to the world and realises the oppressive reality in which she lives, she is unable to succeed. It seems that the elements that surrounds her are stronger. That oppressive and conditioning atmosphere bring to mind the perspective of Naturalism. In naturalistic works, characters’ options are limited by their fates. They are somehow condemned to succumb. The novel presents several features of this literary movement that help to interpret the protagonist’s hostile environment and final decision. The main naturalistic features of the novel are the circular structure that draw a limited space from which no one can escape and its outcome, which somehow is anticipated by means of intertextuality.

The circular structure of the novel is created by means of location. This means that the narration is set in the same place at the beginning of the novel and at the end: Gran Isle. It is a town in Louisiana, located on a barrier island on the same name in the Gulf of Mexico. This location of the story expands throughout several chapters, to be exact, until chapter XVII. Then, its development takes place in New Orleans, where Edna’s awakening occurs. Finally, the action returns to Grand Isle. It is important to notice how much the two descriptions of Grand Isle offered in the novel differs. The first-time readers encounter a beautiful depiction of the site; everything seems to be lovely and peaceful. It is a place full of life and colours. Whereas in the second depiction, it is a “dreary and deserted” place (85), symbolically reflecting Edna’s mood.

Regarding the fated outcome, the author makes use of intertextuality to offer some subtle hints. These are offered to the reader when the duo of the opera *Zampa* that the Zarival twins play is mentioned, as well as the fragment of the opera *Tristan and Isolde* that Mademoiselle Reisz mixed with the Chopin's impromptu. The stories of both musical pieces are related to Edna's situation. The crucial point is that both heroines, Alice and Isolde, die for love. The first one is seduced and then, abandoned by her lover (Bruno, 2018). In the second case, when Isolde sees her beloved die in her arms, she cannot bear it (Opera Online, 2017). As the two stories allude to a woman who dies for love, readers may suspect that this is going to be Edna's end after having been abandoned by Robert.

Going back to the narrator's role, although Edna does not say a word while passing away, readers have access to her final thoughts by means of reported speech. She remembers the blue grass meadow of her childhood. She also reflects about what has happened with her husband and children: "they need not have thought that they could possess her body and soul" (125). It is very significant to note that the only words that the narrator offers in direct style, apparently with the aim of giving them emphasis, are the ones pronounced by Mademoiselle Reisz and Robert. Maybe the author's intention was to let readers know that those are the main reasons for Edna's failure: The pianist doubted Edna's capacity to become an artist and Robert simply said to her goodbye.

5. Conclusion

The main protagonist of the novel, Edna Pontellier, is a reflection of the New Woman. At the end of the 19th century, some women were considering their place in society, questioning their exclusively role as wives and mothers. In this way, Edna Pontellier echoing these New Women looks for another possibility far from the typical role of the Victorian woman.

The novel portrays Edna's emotional evolution, which includes an intellectual development, as she is interested in art (music and painting) and shows the intention of becoming economically independent. She shares the main ideological tenets of the New Women, although those ideas as well as those women were badly considered, the odd ones

at the period. As happened to Edna, they felt that they were not part of the patriarchal system.

The evolution that the main protagonist goes through is perfectly reflected in the use of narrative styles. All the changes in narrative style help to the final understanding of the novel. Along the first chapters, free indirect style and reported speech play a crucial role. They represent a perfect vehicle to create a distance between the narrator and the main protagonist. A distance that helps to view from a certain perspective the environment that surrounds Edna as well as her situation. Readers are able to observe them by means of the conversations that Edna holds with different characters; for example, her husband, Robert, and Madame Ratignolle, who embody the society and the conventions of the period. Throughout this part of the novel, the parodic and ironic tones that sometimes the voice of the narrative voice adopts let readers realise its critical point of view of the society, inviting them to question it.

When Edna's awakening takes place, the narrative style changes in order to give her voice as representation of her awakening. The distance created at the beginning of the novel disappears because the narrator's attitude is characterised now by understanding and sympathy towards her. At the same time, if the first dialogues were portrayed in reported speech, now they are presented in direct style. The fact that Edna is given her own voice is the representation of her awakening. Now, we are presented with the first-person pronoun to express openly her emotions and desires.

Finally, the novel can be interpreted in two different ways. Firstly, as a warning against the danger posed by the protagonist's attempt to break social boundaries. Edna does not fail in trying to become who she wishes to be, but in defying the weight of a whole society that judges negatively those women who do not want to fulfil the role designed for them because of their sex. The second interpretation is a calling. The novel intends to raise women's awareness that they can be much more than they are. It tries to make women become aware of the social reality that surrounds them, but also of their own capacities and abilities to fight back their discrimination. Neither their lives nor their capacities should be determined or limited by the patriarchal system.

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