

Female Rebellion in North-American Literature: Kate Chopin's *The Awakening* and Toni Morrison's *Paradise*

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Abstract

The representation of women in literature began to swift during the last two decades of the Nineteenth-Century. Since this period, the pattern of patriarchal societies and female submission started to change towards an equality of genders in literature. This swift is reflected in Kate Chopin's *The Awakening* and Toni Morrison's *Paradise*. The main aim of this article is to analyse the female protagonists of these works in order to study women's rebellion in two different periods of North-American literature and the consequences in their respective societies.

Keywords: Literature, Rebellion, Society, Patriarchal, Woman, Novels

Título: La Rebelión de la Mujer en la Literatura Norte-Americana: El Despertar de Kate Chopin y Paraíso de Toni Morrison.

Resumen

La representación de la mujer en la literatura comenzó a cambiar durante las dos últimas décadas del siglo XXIX. Desde entonces, el patrón de sociedad patriarcal y la sumisión de la mujer fueron desapareciendo para dar paso a una igualdad de géneros en la literatura. Este movimiento se refleja en *El Despertar* de Kate Chopin y en *Paraíso* de Toni Morrison. El objetivo de este artículo es analizar los personajes femeninos principales de estas obras con el fin de estudiar la rebelión de las mujeres en la literatura Norteamericana de dos periodos diferentes y las consecuencias en sus respectivas sociedades.

Palabras clave: Literatura, Rebelión, Sociedad, Patriarcal, Mujer, Novela.

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Ninety-eight years before Toni Morrison wrote *Paradise* as the culmination of a trilogy, Kate Chopin had already written about a new concept of rebel woman in her novel *The Awakening*. Since Chopin's period, women had been fighting for their rights in order to be considered equal to men. Independently of their nationality or race, many women have faced similar struggles, sharing a common dream: freedom. Women in the fictions of these two female authors, despite written with a century of difference, represent these struggles showing how black and white women have fought to manage freedom and independency from men. Although it was published a century later, in recent years critics, including Elizabeth Ammons, have noticed some influence of Toni Morrison's ideals on Kate Chopin's *The Awakening*.

Due to the similarities noticed between these two novels, this article will attempt to analyze both Kate Chopin's *The Awakening* and Toni Morrison's *Paradise* in order to study how women in these two novels rebel towards the patriarchal society of their respective times, fighting as an attempt to manage equality and the consequences this dare towards the rules provokes in the lives of these female characters. More specifically, it will study how the female characters in these two novels stand as the contrast to the usual concept of woman of the society of their respective periods and the multiple consequences that their attempt of rebellion provokes in their lives, including discrimination, solitude and in its most radical extreme, death. As an anticipated hypothesis, the result of the analysis may be that in both novels despite the attempt of women to manage to become equal to men and break with the conventions of the period in which they live, the end of both books show that the problems rebellion provokes in their lives make them be unable to overcome by themselves the social conventions that entrap them.

To start with the analysis, in *The Awakening* Kate Chopin shows the struggle of women to free themselves from being owned by men, to avoid "being an object of possession defined in her functions" (Chametzky 43). In New Orleans, the setting of Kate Chopin's *The Awakening*, women at the very end of the Nineteenth-Century were subjected to their role as mothers and wives. However, in a patriarchal society in which women were considered men's property, the female protagonist of this novel dares to cross the caste boundaries of the society breaking with the fixed borders of social class, race and gender. As Anna Shannon Elfenbein states in her article, "Reedy was willing to accept a 'woman sinner on American soil if she was a 'foreigner' or a member of the lower class [...] but not if she was white and upper-class, like

Edna Pontellier" (Elfenbein 304). In such period of time, when social norms fixed that women's role was to stay in the house, women like Edna who dared to resist such fixed role were subject to discrimination by both women and men. Despite knowing this, Mrs. Pontellier decides to follow her inner inclinations rather than letting the social boundaries prevent her from living her awakening. As Kenneth M. Rosen states in his essay, Edna Pontellier is "acting out the role of the newly-awakened woman" (Rosen 198). *The Awakening*, then, is the story of how Edna Pontellier fights to overcome the barriers imposed by the society in which she lives, risking herself to become a social outcast in order to defend her ideals.

Despite some critics have considered that the female protagonist of this novel finally does not manage to overcome the barriers imposed by the society of her time, Edna Pontellier attempts to rebel in many different ways. One of them is through the denial of her role as mother and wife ("In short, Mrs. Pontellier was not a mother-woman" *The Awakening* 19). Actually, as the narrator states in the novel, the main reason why Edna married Léonce Pontellier is only the opposition of her family to such union. Furthermore, this may be the reason why she is attracted to Robert Lebrun and Alcee Arobin, as the social conventions of the time did not consider appropriate for a married woman to have an affair with a man who is not her husband. Her affair with these two male characters may then be considered as another way of rebellion of the female protagonist, although such affair finally becomes one of the reasons of her death, provoked in some sort by her love to Robert.

Throughout her rebellion towards the social conventions, Edna is rebelled and compared with the usual role imposed to women in the Creole society ("Mrs. Pontellier, though she had married a Creole, was not thoroughly at home in the society of Creoles; never before had she been thrown so intimately among them" *The Awakening* 22). What most disconcerts Edna of the women of this society is "their entire absence of prudery (*The Awakening* 23). Therefore, she can never feel at home within the society in which her marriage has placed her. However, once she puts aside her repressions, her inappropriate actions go far beyond the Creole's behavior.

In her attempt to rebel towards the society of the end of the Nineteenth-Century, Edna Pontellier also begins a process of self-discovery, of awakening. Through such process, art is presented as one of the ways in which Edna discovers her inner self and learns how to express her anger towards the fixed society conventions. Since the moment in which she starts to paint again, this activity ceases to be an amusement for her in order to become a form of expression. Through such activity, she learns how to express her inner thoughts and emotions and she discovers the pleasures in the individual creation. However, as soon as she begins to express her feelings and her desire of independence, she meets resistance from the society, including her own husband who looks for a doctor to treat her as if she was mad ("She seems quite well [...] but she doesn't act well. She's odd, she's not like herself" *The Awakening* 169). Such statement suggests the reader a link between the rebellion of the woman and madness. Perhaps, as a response to her husband's critique, and to the society in general, when Edna is back in New Orleans she starts avoiding her social responsibilities in order to paint, becoming painting so one of Edna's strategies to rebel towards the fixed role of women during the very end of the Nineteenth-Century. In addition, she also discovers in the activity listening to music a way of evading herself from the real world, moment in which she no longer sees the problems of her life, "no pictures of solitude, of hope, of longing, or of despair. But the very passions themselves were aroused within her soul, swaying it, lashing it, as the waves daily beat upon her splendid body" (*The Awakening* 66).

Throughout the process of self-discovery, Edna also creates an alternative world that stands apart from reality: the world of fantasies. As Donald A. Ringe claims in his essay, "*The Awakening* posits a double world, one within and one without" (Ringe 582). Since she meets Robert in Grand Isle, Edna discovers a new self, "she was seeing with different eyes and making the acquaintance of new conditions in herself that colored and changed her environment" (*The Awakening* 102). Throughout the novel Edna experiences almost everything through her imaginary world of fantasies, where she can manage to be free from conventions and live the life she desires. It is not until the end of the novel that she "awakes" from her dream and realizes of the grim reality ("The years that are gone seem like dreams - if one might go on sleeping and dreaming - but to wake up and find - oh! well! perhaps it is better to wake up after all, even to suffer, rather than to remain a dupe to illusions all one's life" (*The Awakening* 291-2). Unable to accept such life, Edna decides to end this suffering through death, which stands at the very end of the novel as the only way of awakening from her world of fantasy.

Therefore, the novel presents two different Ednas: "At a very early period she had apprehended instinctively the dual life that outward existence which conforms, the inward life which questions" (*The Awakening* 35). This character only manages to provide the strength she needs to threat the social restrictive boundaries through her inner life, through

dreaming. The problem of such division between her two selves, and therefore a consequence of the challenge towards the society of the period, is that Edna may confuse the two worlds. In an attempt to avoid this, she marries Léonce Pontellier thinking that “as the devoted wife of a man who worshiped her, she felt she would take her place with a certain dignity in the world of reality, closing the portals forever behind her upon the realm of romance and dreams” (Bloom 47). This marriage is then a defensive strategy to maintain the integrity of her two selves and to reinforce the distance between both. As Harold Bloom remarks in his book,

“an intuitive man, a sensitive husband, might threaten it; a husband who evoked passion from her might lure the hidden self into the open, tempting Edna to attach her emotions to flesh and blood rather than phantoms. Léonce is neither, and their union ensures the secret safety of Edna’s ‘real’ self” (Bloom 49).

Such statement may be one of the reasons why Edna cannot have a stable relationship with Robert Lebrun, as her outer world where reality stands and her inner world in which she dreams of having a relationship with him would be finally unified. The separation between these two selves in the process of challenging the barriers imposed by society have finally as a consequence the resistant barrier between Edna’s external world of realities and her inner world of fantasies. This frontier forces Edna to sacrifice everyone else to satisfy her self’s demands, as she has to be isolated in order to develop her autonomy and protect her two selves from the society’s threat to dissolve them. As R. D. Laing explains, “the self, in order to develop and sustain its identity and autonomy, and in order to be safe from the persistent threat and danger from the world, has cut itself off from direct relatedness with others” (Laing 147). As a consequence of this, for most part of the second half of the novel Edna remains isolated, becoming solitude one of the main consequences that her rebellion towards the rules imposed by the society of New Orleans at the very end of the Nineteenth-Century brings to her life. However, this isolation seems to stand as a conscious decision of this character who rejects almost everyone else, taking pleasure in being alone most of the time. As she states in the novel “there was no human being whom she wanted near her except Robert; and she even realized that the day would come when he, too, and the thought of him would melt out of her existence, leaving her alone” (*The Awakening* 300).

Moreover, Donald A. Ringe notices in his article: “As the story develops, one begins to suspect that Edna’s self is by its very nature a solitary thing, that she is utterly incapable of forming a true and lasting relationship with another” (Ringe 586). This is clearly appreciated through her relationship with the male characters of the novel as, despite she is married to Léonce Pontellier, she buys a ‘pigeon house’ to live alone and avoid the contact with the later, showing that she is an independent woman who does not need a man in order to survive. Although finally this house does not provide her the expected result, it gives her some temporal freedom; this place works as Edna’s refuge where she can be herself and act in a free way without regarding the social conventions. In addition, despite being attracted by Alcee and in love with Robert she is not able to maintain a relationship with any man in the novel. As George M. Spangler states in his essay “finally none of the men in the novel is prepared to cope with Edna” (Spangler 253). In addition, although being solitude in some sort her own decision, as Ringe points out, her continuous selfish demands to others also contribute to her isolation. Moreover, the continuous attempts to stand apart from the social conventions make the society of New Orleans exclude her and therefore make her remain isolated, being Mademoiselle Reisz the only character in the novel able to understand her ideals.

In addition, after Robert definitely leaves her, Edna finally faces the truth about herself; as Riger points out in the previous quote, for Edna Pontellier no lasting union with anyone in the novel is possible. This character tries to protect her inner self in such a strong way that she even regards her children as her enemies, as “antagonists who had overcome her; who had overpowered her and sought to drag her into the soul’s slavery for the rest of her days” (*The Awakening* 300). Moreover, when Edna is walking down to the beach at the very end of the novel while thinking about her children as her enemies the narrator states “But she knew a way to elude them” (*The Awakening* 300). This sentence narrated while she is walking to the water in order to commit suicide may suggest the reader that one of the reasons why she commits suicide is because of her children and her husband, that it is a way of avoiding her role of mother and wife, of “escaping the slavery represented to her imagination in the form of Léonce and the children” (Ringe 587).

Furthermore, her premeditated death suggests that the only way of overcoming isolation produced by her attempt to rebel towards society is death. Therefore, in trying to defend herself from the threat of society and the attempt to end with the imposed boundaries, the price Edna has to pay is her own life. As Donald A. Ringe states in his previously mentioned article, Edna is presented in *The Awakening* as a “defiant soul who stands out against the limitations that both nature and society place upon her, and who accepts in the final analysis a defeat that involves no surrender” (Ringe 587). Through Edna’s death, therefore, the novel is portraying the consequences that women who stood apart from the social

conventions struggled. However, death in *The Awakening* is not presented as the end of Edna's life, but rather as the beginning of a better afterlife in Heaven with "her father [...] and her sister Margaret" (*The Awakening* 303). When Edna is at the very end of the novel following her destiny she feels as a "newborn creature, opening its eyes in a familiar world that it had never known" (*The Awakening* 301). Such sentence may reinforce the idea of rebirth afterlife in this novel. In addition, the end of the female protagonist's life may be interpreted by the reader as the final triumph of Mrs. Pontellier's rebellion towards the Creole society, as she finally dies fighting for her ideals and liberating herself from the role imposed to her by society. As she previously told to Adele Ratignolle, she would be willing to give up what she considers the unessential for her children, including her money or even her life, but she would not give up herself (*The Awakening* 122).

In the case of Toni Morrison's *Paradise*, this female author represents a patriarchal town where black men are trying to prevent that any woman or white man destroy their "paradise". These men, who believed they had the control over women because of the inscription they interpret from the Oven, did not expect that a group of women refused to live by such standards and rebel towards the norms of such town. In order to flee from such restrictive society this group of women refuges itself in a Convent separated from the city of Ruby, where they create a matriarchal society in which no woman is discriminated, independently of the color of her skin or her past. They have created their own paradise free from the male domination and exclusion they experienced from the black men in Ruby. While the town of Ruby exemplifies "the dangers of home based on sameness, unity and fixity [...]" the Convent becomes an 'open house' where women of unidentified race convene, move through and transform the layers of historical accretion" (Krumholz 23). Moreover, the female inhabitants of such building are compared with the female citizens of the town of Ruby showing that, as Edna Pontellier in Kate Chopin's *The Awakening*, this group of women does not carry the ideals of family or society as the standard of woman of the time, but they rather challenge such conventional ideals. As scholar Claudia Marion Allen states, "women in the Convent are represented as walking, talking, and dressing contrary to what the Ruby men determined was appropriate" (Allen 1).

All the women in the Convent, both the black and the white ones, have suffered in the past the consequences of being women in a patriarchal society. In such male-predominant society, both the few female inhabitants of Ruby and the women in the Convent are on a quest. Both groups of women are attempting to find their ways to become free through self-discovery. In opposition to Edna Pontellier who remains isolated during almost the entire novel, through forging the relationship with the other women in the Convent the female protagonists of *Paradise* are aided to continue the search of their inner selves. As Sallie McFague states, the novel is concerned "with the search for self-identity, the becoming of women, and for movement from nonbeing within the patriarchal model to a new naming of the self and the divine" (McFague 155).

As part of their self-discovery, after this group of women arrives to the Convent they learn to accept self-love. In addition, this building is "the convergence, the center of the crossroads that leads them on their journey of self-discovery" (Gillespie 201). Through the isolation of this building from the town of Ruby, this group of women is challenging the caste boundaries of the patriarchal town, creating their particular paradise which stands apart from the hypocrite paradise of Ruby where, as Reverend Misner suggests, "they think they have outfoxed the whiteman when in fact they imitate him. They think they are protecting their wives and children, when in fact they are maiming them" (*Paradise* 306).

In order to help them to discover their inner selves, Consolata teaches the women in the Convent to paint their silhouettes on the floor, making them gain insight into themselves. Although at first "they wriggled in acute distress but were reluctant to move outside the mold they had chosen" (*Paradise* 275), at the end "with Consolata in charge like a new and revised Reverend Mother [...] they altered" (*Paradise* 275). For Elizabeth Kella, through painting "in *Paradise*, Morrison presents the achievement of this kind of union [of body and spirit] as a deliberate-and difficult-act of personal agency, crucial to the creation of 'authentic' identity" (Kella 221). Through such activity, the group of women undergoes in a spiritual process of self-discovery, learning about their souls through their physical bodies. As Linda Krumholz writes in "Reading and Insight in Toni Morrison's 'Paradise'", "Morrison demonstrates that art is not necessarily created to bring insight; art can be used to reinforce blind acceptance of the status quo" (Krumholz 29). Women are, then, discovering their inner selves and learning to accept them, independently of their past and of being opposed to the social conventions of the neighbor town of Ruby. Moreover, although each painting includes a different perspective based on the artists' experiences, through this symbolic activity the women manage to share their experiences and create a sisterhood which has a particular objective: to cease the social boundaries imposed to women in the town of Ruby.

However, as in Kate Chopin's *The Awakening*, one of the consequences of the rebellion of women towards the conventions in Morrison's novel is their isolation, both mentally and physically in a Convent seventeen miles from the

town of Ruby. As Biddy Martin writes in his book, "there is an irreconcilable tension between the search for a secure place from which to speak, within which to act, and the awareness of the price at which secure places are bought, the awareness of the exclusions, the denials, the blindnesses on which they are predicated" (Martin 206). Apart from the racist implications that the exclusion of this group of women from the town Ruby in most of the cases is due to the white color of their skins or their bad reputation, the novel also portrays their isolation as a consequence of belonging to what the male citizens of Ruby consider "the weak gender".

However, as Edna Pontellier in *The Awakening*, the women in the Convent of *Paradise*, despite having been excluded from the male-predominant neighbor town, are isolated because of their own decision. Actually, the new women that arrive to the Convent during the development of the novel choose this place believing such building "to be a place where they can hide from the consequences of life" (Appleton 516). In an attempt to flee from their lives and their past Connie, Mavis, Gigi, Seneca, and Pallas, as well as the previous women already at the Convent before their arrival, find a refuge in such isolated building. From this space, they challenge the patriarchal utopia that the men in Ruby created, trying to demonstrate the oppressive nature surrounding the Oven.

Actually, before the bloody massacre takes place at the end of the novel, the women in the Convent seem to have gained some power with respect to the male inhabitants in Ruby. As, Linda J. Krumholz suggests, "the central functions of the sacred Oven have shifted to the Convent, where the women cook together and dance in the baptismal rain" (Krumholz 27-8). In addition, despite women are finally killed as a consequence of their rebellion towards the chaste boundaries, as it happens in Chopin's *The Awakening* and in contrast to the fear of Ruby's men, death is not represented as the end of the women's lives, but as a relieve from the suffering that these women experienced during their lives, suggesting the novel even the idea of rebirth or afterlife. As Reverend Misner attests at the funeral of Save-Marie, "life in life is terminal and life after life is everlasting, He is with us always, in life, after it and especially in between, lying in wait for us to know the splendor" (*Paradise* 307).

The novel even suggests the reader that, as in the case of Mrs. Pontellier, the women in the Convent were conscious that they were going to die and were ready for it ("If you have a place that you should be in and somebody who loves you waiting there, then go. If not stay here and follow me. Someone could want to meet you" *Paradise* 262). Such statement from Consolata may suggest the reader that this group of women dies as an attempt to defend their ideals and break with the patriarchal society of Ruby demonstrating the rest of the women in that city the hypocrite society in which they live. Moreover, the women's decision to stay in the Convent despite being conscious that they are risking their lives reinforces the idea that the deaths of these women warriors are the price to pay in order to change the society ideals. In addition, the bloody murder of these women by the male citizens of Ruby may change the attitude of the reader towards the later characters, regarding the women of the Convent as heroes who have been killed because of trying to show that no one should be criticized because of the color of their skin or their gender.

After having analyzed both Kate Chopin's *The Awakening* and Toni Morrison's *Paradise*, I have come to the conclusion that both authors create in their novels a group of female protagonists who dare to challenge the society conventions imposed in their respective periods. In addition, both female writers portray the process of self-discovery that their female characters experiment throughout the novels, as well as the multiple consequences that the dare to break the patriarchal tradition in their respective cultures causes in their lives, including isolation and even death, either by suicide or by murder.

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