

Michelle Tennet

Dr. Bordelon

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Edna's Journey to Independence

Throughout America's history women have not been treated equally compared to men. Men have always had freedoms handed to them. Women have had to fight for their freedoms. They fought for the right to vote, and the right to own property. Men have always had the independence to do as they desired without the interference of social restrictions. Women have not been as fortunate. Even today, women are restrained by society. Women are not compensated equally for the same position their male counterpart holds. Men still maintain the majority of the executive level positions.

This restraint was much worse for Edna Pontellier, a character in Kate Chopin's 1899 novel, The Awakening. Edna desires freedom and individuality. These desires motivate her to achieve independence. She goes through several stages trying to achieve this independence. The first stage is when she is aware that she is confined, yet accepts it. The second stage is when she tests her confinement. The final stage is when she reaches her ultimate goal -- independence.

In the first stage Edna is trapped yet she accepts her place in society. In the 1800's women stayed home busying themselves with household obligations and overseeing the care of their children. Etiquette books of the time tell women the home is "the nucleus around which her affections should revolve, and beyond which she has comparatively small concern" (122). Edna accepts this role as dutiful wife and mother.

Mr. Ponttieller “look[s] at his wife as one looks at a valuable piece of personal property” (4). He does not love her for her individuality; she is not individual in his eyes because she is his possession. He believes she belongs to him, just as the birds in the opening scene “were the property of Madame Lebrun” (1). Edna is caged in Leonce’s house just as the birds were in the Lebrun’s. When Leonce goes to Klein’s Edna questions whether or not he will be back for dinner. Leonce patted his pocket but did not answer. Edna “understood [it depended on the game] and laughed, nodding goodbye to him” (5). She does not get upset or angry at his vague answer she accepts her place as his wife.

Edna finds herself crying one night when her husband leaves home to spread his own wings at the local club, Klein’s. “Such [crying episodes. . .] were not uncommon in her married life” (8). This vulnerability expresses how trapped she feels by her marriage. She does not have the ability to go where she pleases when she pleases. It is this same kind of entrapment that lead Betty Friedan to write the Feminine Mystique, fifty four years after Chopin wrote The Awakening. Friedan wrote about women who “[felt] empty somehow... incomplete” (435). She wrote about how women wanted something for themselves: a life that included more than just living for their husbands. Edna was crying for this same reason. Society expected women to take care of the home in the 1890’s, just as it continued to do in the 1960’s.

Edna is not only trapped by her marriage, but also trapped by her role as a mother. She has two young children yet “[she is] not a mother-woman” (9). Although Edna did not have the patience and personality for children, she had no options. The main birth control was abstinence. This was not an option for a young married woman. Husbands expected sex from their wives. Because of the lack of birth control, and these sexual

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