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*The Awakening : A Desire to Fly Freely*

Birds are beautiful creatures. They soar freely through the air, proclaiming their songs for the world to hear. It is not a surprise that these creatures have been captured and forced to live in cages for the entertainment of human-beings. Who would not want a thing of beauty as a permanent fixture of one's living room? In *The Awakening* by Kate Chopin, there are plenty of beautiful creatures that are trapped, either physically in cages or in one's societal place based on gender. Edna shares many similarities with birds--both freed and caged--throughout the novel. The freedom or lack thereof birds can often correlate to the imprisonment Edna Pontellier experiences mentally throughout as well as the natural desire for freedom.

Two caged birds. A parrot situated in a cage on one side of the door and a mockingbird situated on the opposite side. "The parrot and the mockingbird were the property of Madame Lebrun, and they had the right to make all the noise they wished" (p.1). These two birds are the property of Madame Lebrun, meaning she owns them and they are essentially there to bring her some sort of comfort or entertainment. In a similar way, Edna Pontellier is also the property of another being, just like the parrot and the mockingbird. Edna's husband, Mr. Pontellier, is described as "...looking at his wife as one looks at a valuable piece of property which has suffered some damage" (p.2). Any good owner wants their property to be in good shape, so when Edna came back from the beach with reminiscence of the sun filled day burned into her skin, Mr. Pontellier was bothered. He works hard to provide and keep his property looking nice, so having it presented any other way is less than desirable. Edna is just another one of Pontellier's

possessions and he treats her as such. For this reason, she is trapped in her marriage, trapped in her place in society.

Freedom is natural and expected when you are a bird, so it is no surprise that Edna longs for freedom while trapped within the tight grasp of her marriage. Owls are birds that are active in the nighttime, free to go about their business while the majority of the world is asleep. The owl experiences full freedom without the constraint of a cage throughout the novel. A place where Edna is able to feel a slight freedom is on the porch. Here “there was no sound abroad except the hooting of an old owl in the top of a water-oak” (p. 7). It is almost as if the owl is calling out to Edna, specifically, taunting a trapped woman with her freedom to roam in the night. Edna cries literal tears as the owl cries into the night. Does the owl know why she cries in the night? Edna surely did not understand where her tears were coming from. She was free to let her tears flow here on the porch, yet she did not put together that these tears could be the result of feeling the tiniest bit of freedom by fleeing to the porch. Like the caged birds, from this vantage point she is able to see nature and her freedom, breathe it in, yet it is still separate from her while under the awning of the porch. Edna’s tears are perhaps tears of exhaustion and relief from being able to escape, even if only a little bit. Edna, little by little, is exposed to bits of freedom and concludes on a porch with freedom in her sights that she should “...like the feeling of freedom and independence” (p.94). Just like the owl free in the night, Edna is gaining freedom on the porch while she is free from the stress of her husband as he sleeps through the night. It is also fitting that Edna’s first moment of defiance toward her husband takes place on the porch with the night and owl as an audience. Edna insists to sleep in the hammock outside on the porch and as she defies Mr. Pontellier’s wishes to come inside “[t]he old owl no longer hooted, and the water oaks

had ceased to moan as they bent their heads” (p.37). Edna has stood her ground and voiced her desire, going against the wishes of her husband and in this moment she has gained some of the freedom which before only the owl possessed, thus she was silenced as Edna could speak. It is almost as if the owl is silent in order to allow for Edna to speak her mind, listening to Edna’s concerns and allowing them to be heard without the interruption of distant hoots.

Birds are musical creatures, singing their songs for the world to hear. It is thus interesting that Edna feels such a connection to music, as birds seemingly always carry a tune. Madame Lebrun’s Parrot shows his natural incline toward good music by voicing displeasure with the provided musical entertainment, being “the only one present who possessed sufficient candor to admit that he was not listening to these gracious performances for the first time that summer” (p.27). It is almost suggested that birds are natural musicians, with inclined ears for beautiful melodies, yet even though the parrot has a natural inclination toward music, a few of the men present wish to have the parrot removed, simply because they do not agree with his disapproval. Why should the bird be silenced for voicing her honest opinion? The answer to this is the same reasoning behind why later on in the novel, Edna attempts to speak her voice of disapproval toward the treatment from her husband and subsequently is silenced just as the parrot had been earlier in the summer. This rather short inclusion of the parrot being silenced for voicing its displeasure with her environment foreshadows that of a similar encounter Edna experiences later on, once again a bird being used to perhaps symbolizes the emotions and feelings of the oppressed Edna. The Parrot is unmoved by the notes coinciding with the plunking of the keys of the piano, while Edna is completely moved into tremors by melodies later in the evening. Edna and the parrot both share a natural ear for music. Music is another means of freedom for Edna, as

she escapes to have Mademoiselle Reisz play for her many times, and “It was then, in the presence of that personality which was offensive to her, that the woman, by her divine art, seemed to reach Edna’s spirit and set it free” (p.92). In these moments when Mademoiselle Reisz is playing the piano, Edna is once again given glimpses of freedom. In these moments, she is not trapped. The melodies free her thoughts and allow her to escape her real-life, even if just for the duration of a song. The chords of Mademoiselle Reisz are free and unrestricted by her years of living freely without a husband, and the emotion placed behind her music was that of which Edna longed for. She longed for the freedom to play whatever she wanted, to go wherever she wanted to go without the constraints of her husband.

Edna does her painting in her atelier which is a room in the top of the house (p.67). This is related to the symbolism of a bird in that birds build their nests in trees, often high up from the ground. It is fitting that Edna’s place of escape in her home is at the highest level. Why do birds reside in the hightops of the trees? It is here that they are left alone, the only creatures up this high are fellow birds. They are “...good to dream and be alone and unmolested” (p.68), away from the predators of the ground, just as Edna is away from the oppression of running the house down below when she retreats to her little study atop the house. Similarly, Mademoiselle Reisz chooses to live on the upper levels of a building (p.72). This woman was the woman who brought such joyous music to Edna, and symbolizes a free bird, being unmarried and free to float around like the melodies she produces. It is only fitting that she lives atop a building, just like free birds live atop trees. She lives directly under the roof so as to “discourage the approach of beggars, peddlars, and callers” (p.72) or other annoyances of the street or ground level. Edna’s refusal to come down from the high step ladder is yet another connection to the height of birds in

trees. She is higher up than the rest of the people in the room (p.100) and even when pleaded with to come down, she refuses. Up high, birds are safe from predators and the same goes for oppressed women such as Edna. If she climbs high enough, no one can touch her.

The smaller house in which Edna wishes to escape to is nicknamed the 'pigeon house' due to its size and how it looks (p.100). This name can also correlate to the freedom Edna will experience upon her escape. She will be free in this small house, like a bird is free in nature. It is only fitting that Edna's freedom house is named for a bird. What is interesting about pigeons is that they are common city birds, often forgotten or simply the annoyance of passers by. Edna's flee to the pigeon house is an annoyance to Mr. Pontellier. He cannot have society looking down on him like his property, his wife is out of his control and able to leave and move out simply because it is what her heart desires. Pigeons are low on the totem pole of birds, searching for scraps on the street, but they are free nonetheless. By choosing to leave her husband, Edna chooses to fall down the totem pole of society, losing her safety net and her husband's protection and money, being left only with the trust from when her mother died. Yet this is the price Edna is willing to pay, sacrificing everything she has grown comfortable with, in order to gain freedom and independence. Pigeons may be low creatures, but they are happy anyway, which is exactly what Edna is searching for in her escape to her tiny pigeon house.

Even though birds are free in nature, it does not mean that they are free from harm. Birds can still be injured or even killed in nature. Just because a bird is injured, it does not mean that it is going to quit flying, quit its vehicle of freedom. As Edna is descending into the gulf, she is broken, yet she is not done fighting for her freedom. This act is giving her desire for freedom a voice, clearly stating her desire to be free. One could even argue that Edna is free in death. Just

like the “...bird with a broken wing was beating the air above, reeling, fluttering, circling disabled down, down to the water” (p.136), Edna, too, though broken kept fighting for her right to freedom even in her apparent suicide. Edna has broken a bit in her attempts at freedom and it is only fitting that a bird with a broken wing spirals down as Edna descends into the depths of the gulf, her final attempt at freedom, which could only be found in death.

In nature, birds are free. Although they may be captured as one’s property, there is always a drive for freedom through an open window or door. Freedom is always a possibility for birds. Edna Pontellier strived to be free in her life, just like birds strive to be soaring through the air, freely without any cares. Edna in life and in death shared many similarities with birds, both imprisoned and free.

Works Cited

Chopin, Kate. *The Awakening*. Signet Classics, 1976.